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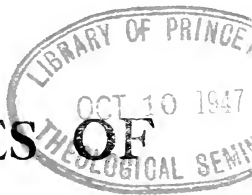








# THE PARABLES OF OUR LORD



BY

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"AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT,"  
"ISRAEL'S IRON AGE," ETC.

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# THE PARABLES OF OUR LORD.

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## THE SOWER.

MATT. xiii. 1-9, 18-23; LUKE viii. 4-15.

This parable had to be spoken. It gave expression to thoughts which burdened the mind of Jesus throughout His ministry. On the day He uttered it, he had left the house and was sitting by the sea-side, "and there were gathered unto Him great multitudes." He had no difficulty in finding an audience. It is one of the greatest pleasures to listen to a good speaker. It is a pleasure which attracts young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. A good speaker is always sure of an audience, and especially where he has not to encounter the rivalry of books. But as Jesus watched the crowd assembling, and perceived the various dispositions with which the people came, He could not but reflect how much of what He had to say must certainly be lost on many. He knew He had that to tell men which, if received, would change the face of society, and

turn the wilderness into a garden. He was conscious of that in His own mind which, could it only be conveyed into the minds of those pressing around Him, would cause their lives to flourish with righteousness, beauty, love, usefulness, and joy. He had "many things to say" to them, things that never yet had fallen and never again could fall from human lips; and yet who, of the thousands that listened, would believe? They came, some out of curiosity, some saying within themselves, "What will this sower of words say?" some out of hatred, seeking occasion against Him; but all thinking themselves entitled to hold and express an opinion regarding the importance or worthlessness of what He said. They needed to have their critical faculty exercised upon themselves, and to be reminded that in order to benefit by what He had to say, they must bring certain capacities.

The parabolic form of teaching is pleasant to listen to; it is easily retained in the memory; it stimulates thought, each man being left to find an interpretation for himself; and it avoids the offensiveness of direct rebuke. To the crowd Jesus speaks only of the sower in the fields, and makes no explicit reference to Himself or to them.

The object of this parable, then, is to explain the causes of the failure and success of the gospel. Apart from experience, it might have been

supposed that our Lord had only to proclaim His kingdom in order to gather all men to His standard. If it were so that God desired all men to enter into everlasting joy, did not this remove every difficulty, and secure the happiness of all? Could such a messenger and such a message fail to move every one who came in contact with them? Alas! even after so many centuries Christianity is not the one only religion men believe in; and even where it is professed, it is most inadequately understood and received. Why, then, is it so? why, to so lamentable an extent does every agency for the extension of Christ's kingdom fail? It fails, says our Lord, not because the claims of the kingdom are doubtful, not because they are inappropriately urged—these causes may no doubt sometimes operate—but the kingdom fails to extend because the fructification of the seed of the word depends upon the nature of the soil it falls upon, and because that soil is often impervious, often shallow, often dirty. The seed is not in fault, the sowing is not in fault, but the soil is faulty—a statement of the case as little accepted by those in our own day who discuss Christ's claims, as it was by our Lord's contemporaries.

1. The first faultiness of soil our Lord specifies in the words, "Some seeds fell by the way-side, and the fowls came and devoured them up;" and the interpretation or spiritual analogue

He gives in the words, "When any one heareth the word of the kingdom and *understandeth it not*, then cometh the wicked one and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart." The beaten footpath that crosses the corn-field, and that is maintained year after year, or the cart-track along the side of the field, may serve a very useful purpose, but certainly it will grow no corn. The hard surface does not admit the seed: you might as well scatter seed on a wooden table, or a pavement, or a mirror. The seed may be of the finest quality, but for all the purposes of sowing you might as well sprinkle pebbles or shot. It lies on the surface. This state of matters then represents that hearing of the word which manages to keep the word entirely outside. The word has been heard, but that is all. It has not even entered the understanding. It has been heard as men listen to what is said in a foreign language. The mind is not interested; it is roused to no inquiry, provoked to no contradiction. You have sometimes occasion to suggest a different course of action to a friend; and, in order to do so, you mention a fact which should be sufficient to alter his purpose, but you find he has not apprehended its significance, has not seen its bearing—it has not fructified in his mind as you expected, and you say to yourself; "He does not take it in." So says our Lord: there are hearers who do not take in what is said; they

do not see the bearings of the word they hear ; their understanding is impervious, impenetrable.

Are there such hearers? Surely there are. There are persons on whom the seed of the word falls as by accident, and who have neither prepared themselves to hear it, nor make any effort to retain it. They are members of a church-going family, or they have formed a church-going habit of their own ; they have perhaps their reason for being found side by side with those who hear with profit, but they do not come for the sake of hearing ; they are not anxious to hear, thoughtful about what they hear, careful to retain it. There are careless persons who hear the word not as the result of a decision that it *is* to be heard ; not as they would, on beginning the study of chemistry or of philosophy, seek out certain teachers and certain books ; but as the hearing of the word happens to be the employment of the hour, they submit to this social convention, and they allow the seed of the kingdom to fall upon them with no more expectation than that with which they hear the passing salutation of a friend on the street, knowing that whether he says it is a fine day or not, it is equally without significance. This hearing of the word has come to be one of the many employments with which men fill up their time, and this hearer has never thought why, nor whether it does him any good or no. He has never considered why he personally should listen

to this special kind of word, nor what he personally may expect as the result of it.

There are, in short, persons who, either from preoccupation with other thoughts and hopes, have their minds beaten hard and rendered quite impervious to thoughts of Christ's kingdom, or from a natural slowness and hard frostiness of nature, hear the word without admitting it even to work in their understanding. They do not ponder what is heard, they do not check the statements they hear by their own thought; they do not consider the bearings of the gospel on themselves. When you propose to a farmer who is paying too high a rent to go to some part of the country where rents are lower, the idea will probably find entrance into his understanding. He may not ultimately adopt it, but it will stir a great many hopes and thoughts of various kinds in him, and he will find his mind dwelling on it day after day, and hour by hour, so that he can speak of little else. But the proposals made to the wayside hearer suggest nothing at all to him. His mind throws off Christ's offers as a slated roof throws off hail. You might as well expect seed to grow on a tightly-braced drum-head as the word to profit such a hearer; it dances on the hard surface, and the slightest motion shakes it off.

The consequence is, it is forgotten. When seed is scattered on a hard surface it is not allowed to lie long. The birds devour it up. Every

hedge, every tree, every roof contributes its eager few, and shortly not a corn remains. So when not even the mind has been interested in Christ's word, that word is quickly forgotten; the conversation on the way home from church, the thought of to-morrow's occupations, the sight of some one on the street—anything, is enough to take it clean away. In some persons the word is admitted though it does not at once bring forth fruit. As in the old fable the words spoken unheard in the Arctic circle were thawed into sound and became audible in warmer latitudes; so when a man passes into new circumstances and a state of life more congenial to the development of Christian discipleship, the word which has apparently been lost for years begins to stir and make itself heard in his soul. But it cannot be so with the wayside hearer, for in him the word has never found any manner of lodgment.

2. The second faultiness of soil our Lord enumerates is *shallowness*. What we commonly understand by "stony ground" is a field thickly strewn with small stones; not the best kind of soil, but quite available for growing corn. This is not the soil meant here. Our Lord speaks rather of rocky ground, where a thin surface of mold overlies an impenetrable rock. There is a mere dusting of soil on the surface; if you put a stick or a spade into it, you come upon the rock a few inches below. On such ground the seed

quickly springs, there being no deepness of earth to allow of its spending time in rooting itself. And for the same reason it quickly withers when exposed to the fierce heats which benefit and mature strongly-rooted plants. Precocity and rapid growth are everywhere the forerunners of rapid decay. The oak that is to stand a thousand years does not shoot up like the hop or the creeper. Man whose age is seventy years has a slowly growing infancy and youth, while the insect grows up in a day and dies at night or at the week's end.

The shallow hearer our Lord distinguishes by two characteristics ; he straightway receives the word, and he receives it with joy. The man of deeper character receives the word with deliberation, as one who has many things to take into account and to weigh. He receives it with seriousness, and reverence, and trembling, foreseeing the trials he will be subjected to, and he cannot show a light-minded joy. The superficial character responds quickly because there is no depth of inner life. Difficulties which deter men of greater depth do not stagger the superficial. While other men are engaged in giving the word entrance into all the secret places of their life, and are confronting it with their most cherished feelings and ways, that they may clearly see the extent of the changes it will work : while they are pondering it in the majesty of its hope and the vastness of its revelation ; while they are striving to forecast all its



results in them and upon them ; while they are hesitating because they are in earnest, and would receive the word for eternity or not at all, and would give it entrance to the whole of their being, or exclude it altogether,—while others are doing this, the superficial man has settled the whole matter out of hand, and he who yesterday was a known scoffer is to-day a loud-voiced child of the kingdom.

These men may often be mistaken for the most earnest Christians: indeed they are almost certainly taken to be the most earnest ; you cannot see the root, and what is seen is shown in greatest luxuriance by the superficial. The earnest man has much of his energy to spend beneath the soil, he cannot show anything till he is sure of the root. He is often working away at the foundation while another is at the copestone. But the test comes. The very influences which exercise and mature the well-rooted character, wither the superficially rooted. The same shallowness of nature which made them susceptible to the gospel and quickly responsive, makes them susceptible to pain, suffering, hardship, and easily defeated. It is so in all departments of life. The superficial are taken with every new thing. The boy is delighted with a new study or a new game, but becomes proficient in neither. The youth is charmed with volunteering, but one season of early rising is more than he can stand: or he is fascinated

with the idea that history is an extremely profitable kind of reading; but you know quite well when he asks for the loan of the first volume of Gibbon or Grote, that he will never come to you for the last. The action of the shallow man is in every case hasty, not based on a carefully considered and resolutely accepted plan: he is charmed with the first appearances, and does not look into the matter, and forecast results and consequences. Accordingly, when consequences have to be faced, he is not prepared and gives way.

But how, then, can the shallow man be saved? Is there no provision in the gospel for those who are born with a thin, poor nature? This question scarcely falls to be answered here, because the parable presents one truth regarding shallow natures, which is verified in thousands of instances. Men do thus deal with the word, and thus make shipwreck of faith, and that is all we have here to do with. But passing beyond the parable, it may be right to say that a man's nature may be deepened by the events, and relationships, and conflicts of life. Indeed, that much deepening of character is constantly effected, you may gather from the fact that while many young persons are shallow, the old persons whom you would characterize as shallow are comparatively few.

3. The third faultiness of soil which causes failure in the crop is what is technically known as

*dirt.* The soil is not impenetrable, nor is it shallow; it is deep, good land, but it has not been cleaned—there is seed in it already. Sometimes you see a field of wheat brilliantly colored throughout with poppies; or a field of oats which it is difficult to cut on account of the dense growth of thistles, and of rank grass. But the soil can only feed a certain amount of vegetation, and every living weed means a choked blade of corn. This is a worse case than the others. No crop can be looked for on a beaten road, not much can be expected from a mere peppering of soil upon rock; but here there is rich, deep, loamy mould, that must be growing something, and would, if cared for, yield a magnificent harvest, and yet there is little or nothing but thorns.

This is a picture of the preoccupied heart of the rich, vigorous nature, capable of understanding, appreciating, and making much of the word of the kingdom, but occupied with so many other interests, that only a small part of its energy is available for giving effect to Christ's ideas. These ideas are not excluded from the thoughts, they are welcomed; the mind is full of intelligent interest in Christian truth, and the heart has a real and profound sympathy with the work of Christ in the world and with His spirit, and yet, after all, little practical good proceeds from the man—Christian principle does not come to much in his case—the life shows little result

of a specially Christian kind. The reason is that the man is occupied with a multitude of other views, and projects, and cares, and desires, and the peculiarly Christian seed does not get fair play. It influences him, but it is hindered and mixed up with so many other influences that the result is scarcely discernible. The peculiarity of a good field of wheat is not the density of the vegetation, but that the vegetation is all of one kind, is all wheat. Leave the field to itself, you will in a short time have quite as dense a vegetation, but it will be of a multifarious kind. That the field bears wheat only, is the result of cultivation—not merely of sowing wheat, but of preventing anything else from being sown. The first care of the diligent farmer is to clean his land.

And as there is generally some one kind of weed to which the soil is congenial, and against which the farmer has to wage a continual war, so our Lord here specifies as specially dangerous to us “the care of this world and the deceitfulness of riches.” The care of this world has been called the poor man’s species of the deceitfulness of riches, and the deceitfulness of riches a variety of the care of this world. There are poor men who have no anxiety, and rich men who are not misled by their riches either into dependence on their wealth, or desire to make it more. But among rich men and poor men alike you will

find some or many who would be left without any subject of thought, and any guiding principle in action, if you took from them anxiety about their own position in life. It is this from which all the fruit they bear springs. Take the actions of a year, the annual outcome or harvest of the man, and how much of what he has produced you can trace to this seed—to a mere anxiety about income and position. This is really the seed, this is all that is required to account for a large part of many men's actions.

Our Lord therefore warns us that if the word is to do its work in us, and produce all the good it is meant to produce, it must have the field to itself. It will not do merely to give attention to the word while it is preached: the mind may be clean on the surface, while there remain great knots of roots below, which will inevitably spring up, and by their more inveterate growth choke the word. This is the mistake of many. It is proper, they know, to hear the word—proper to give it fair play. They do make an effort to banish worldly and anxious thoughts, and to give their attention to divine things, but even though they succeed in putting aside for the time distracting thoughts, what of that if they have not the care of the world up by the roots? Cutting down won't do: still less, a mere holding aside of the thorns till the seed be sown. What chance has the seed in a heart from which these eager thoughts and hopes are

merely held back for the hour? The cares of the world will just swing over again and meet above the good seed, and shut out the day and every maturing influence. You receive to-day good impressions, you give the good seed entrance, and it begins to spring in you, it prompts you to a reasonable generosity and self-denial. To-morrow morning the tender blade of a desire to purify and prepare your spirit by some real and devout converse with God has sprung up in you, but the habitual craving to be at your work and lose no moment from business crushes and chokes the little blade, and it can no more lift its head. Or the seed has produced even the green ear of a growing habit of living under God's eye, of walking with God and bringing all your transactions before His judgment,—mature fruit seems on the point of being produced by you, when suddenly the promise of a rich harvest is choked by the old coarse thorn of a fondness for rapid profits, which leads you to ambiguous language, and reservations, and unfair dealings, such as you feel separate you from God, and dash your spiritual ardor, and make you feel like a fool and a knave both, when you speak of your citizenship being in heaven. It is vain, then, to hope for the only right harvest of a human life if your heart is sown with worldly ambitions, a greedy hasting to be rich, an undue love of comfort, a true earthliness of spirit. One seed only must be sown in and, you

it will produce all needed diligence in business, as well as all fervor of spirit.

These, then, are the three faulty soils to which our Lord chiefly ascribes the failure of the sowing. The question arises, Does the result follow in the moral sowing and in the world of men as uniformly and inevitably as it follows in the sowing of corn in nature? In nature some soils are irreclaimable, vast tracts of the earth's surface are as useless as the sea for the purposes of growing grain. They may indirectly contribute to the fruitfulness of corn lands by influencing the climate, but no one thinks of cultivating these tracts themselves, of sowing the sands of Sahara or the ice-fields of Siberia. But the gospel is to be preached to every creature, because in man there is one important distinction from material nature; he is possessed of free will, of the power of checking to some extent natural tendencies, and preventing natural consequences. Accordingly, we cannot just accept the bare teaching of the parable as the whole truth regarding the operation of the gospel in man's heart, but only as one part of the truth, and that a most important part. The parable enters into no consideration nor explanation of how men arrive at the spiritual conditions here enumerated; but, given those conditions—and they are certainly common however arrived at—given those conditions, the result is failure of the gospel.

In contrast, then, to these three faults of impenetrability, shallowness, and dirt, we may be expected to do something towards bringing to the hearing of the word a soft, deep, clean soil of heart, or, as Luke calls it, "an honest and good heart." There are differences in the crop even among those who bring good hearts; one bears thirty-fold, one sixty, one an hundred-fold. One man has natural advantages, opportunities of position, and so forth, which make his yield greater. One man may have had a larger proportion of seed; in his early days and all through his life he may have been in contact with the word, and in favoring circumstances. But wherever the word is received, and held fast, and patiently cared for, there the life will produce all that God cares to have from it.

Honesty is a prime requisite in hearing the word, and a rare one. Men listen honestly to a lecture on science or history, from which they expect information; but where conduct is aimed at, or a vote is concerned, men commonly listen with minds already made up. It is notorious that men vote as they meant to vote, no matter what is said. If a Liberal were found voting with Conservatives on any important point, some mistake would be supposed. The last thing thought of would be that his convictions had been altered by the speaking. But if we are to hear the word as we ought, we must bring an honest heart, we must



not listen with a mind already made up against the gospel, with no intention whatever of being persuaded, cherishing purposes and habits, alongside of which it is impossible the word should grow. On the contrary, we should consider that this is the seed proper to the human heart, and which can alone produce what human life should produce—the word of God, which we must listen to gratefully, humbly, sincerely, greedily, and with the firm purpose of giving it unlimited scope within us. But where is the attentive, painstaking scrutiny of the heart which this demands? Where is the careful husbandry of our souls, which would secure a kindly reception for the word? Where is the jealous challenging of every sentiment, habit, influence, association, that begs for a lodging within us? For where this is, and not elsewhere, we may expect the fruit of the kingdom.

But even this is not enough. The fruitful hearer must not only bring an honest and good heart, he must *keep* the word. The farmer's work is not finished when he has prepared the soil and sown the seed. If pains be not taken after the sowing, the seed that has fallen on good soil may be taken away as utterly as that which has fallen on the beaten path. The birds scatter over the whole field. We must therefore set a watcher; we must send the harrow over to cover in the seed, and the roller to give the plant a better hold

on the soil. The word must not be allowed to take its chance, once it has been heard. Mere hearing does not secure fruit ; it goes for nothing. Your labor is lost unless your mind goes back upon what you hear, and you see that it gets hold of you. All of us have already heard all that is necessary for life and godliness ; it remains that we make it our own, that it secure a living root and place in us and in our life. In order to this we must keep the truth ; we must bear it in mind, so that whatever else comes before the mind throws new light on it, and gives it a further hold upon us. We must not let the events of the world and the occurrences of our day thrust it from our minds, but must confront it with these, and test it by these, so that thus it may become more real to us, and have a vital influence. One truth received thus, brings forth more fruit than all truth merely understood. It is not the amount of knowledge you have, but the use you put it to—it is not the number of good sayings you have heard and can repeat, that will profit you, but the place in your hearts you have given them, and the connection they have with the motives, and principles, and ruling ideas of your life.

And, therefore, meditation has always been, and must always be, reckoned among the most indispensable means of grace. Since ever saints were, their saintliness has been in great part due to a habit of meditation. Without it, the other

means of grace remain helplessly outside of us. The word does not profit except the mind be actively appropriating God's message and revolving it. Prayer is but a deluding form, that means nothing, expects nothing, and receives nothing, if meditation has not provided its material. Unless a man think upon his life and try his ways, his confession can but remove the scum from the surface, leaving the heart burdened and polluted; for the graver sins do not float, but sink deep, and must be dragged for with patience and skill, if not descried through a very rare natural clearness and simplicity of character. It is in the stillness and quiet of our hours of reflection, when the gusts of worldly engagements and desires have died down, that the seeds of grace are deposited in our souls. It is then that our thoughts are free to recognize reasons of humility and causes of thankfulness. It is then that the thought of God resumes its place in our souls, and that the unseen world reasserts its hold upon us. It is then only that the soul, taking a deliberate survey of its own matters, can discover its position and necessities, can assert its claims and determine its future, can begin the knowledge of all things by knowing itself. So that, "if there is a person, of whatever age, or class, or station, who will not be thoughtful, who will not seriously and honestly consider, there *is* no doing him any good."

But there is probably no religious duty so dis-

tasteful as meditation to persons whose habits are formed in a state of society like our own. We are, for the most part, infected by the hastiness and overdone activity of the business world. The rapidity and exactness of mechanical action rule and regulate all our personal movements. We are learning to value only what gives us speedily and uniformly achieved and easily appreciated results. We are civilized so nearly to one common level, and are in possession of so many advantages which hitherto have been the monopoly of one class, that competition is keener than ever before; and all our time and energy are demanded for the one purpose of holding our own in things secular. But the dissatisfaction with slow processes, and the desire to get a great deal through our hands, must be checked when we come to the work of meditation. There are processes in nature which you can't hurry. You must let your milk *stand*, if you wish cream. And meditation is a process of mind whose necessary element is the absence of hurry. We must let the mind settle and discharge itself of all irritating distractions and fevering remembrances or hopes; we must reduce it to an equable state, from which it can look out dispassionately upon things, and no longer see the one engrossing object, but all that concerns us in due proportion and real position. The soul must learn to turn a deaf ear to the importunate re-

quirements of the daily life, and turn leisurely and with an unpreoccupied mind to God. Were it only to keep the world at bay, and teach the things of it their subordinate place, these meditative pauses of the soul were of the richest use.

A third and last requisite for the fructification of the seed is, according to Luke, patience. The husbandman does not expect to reap to-morrow what he sowed to-day. He does not incontinently plow up his field again, and sow another crop, if he does not at once see the ripe corn. He watches and waits, and through much that is disappointing and unpromising, nurses his plants to fruitfulness. We also must learn with patience to bring forth fruit ; not despairing because we cannot at once do all we would ; not sinking under the hardships, sacrifices, failures, sorrows, through which we must win our growth to true fruit-bearing, but animating and cheering our spirits with the sure hope that the seed we have received is vital, and will enable us to produce at last the sound and ripe fruit our lives were meant to yield. We must have patience both to endure all the privations, all the schooling, all the trial of various kinds which may be needful to bring the seed of righteousness to maturity ; and also to go on zealously yielding the perhaps despised fruits which are alone possible to us now, and striving always to strike our roots deeper and deeper into the true life.

## THE TARES.

MATT. xiii. 24-30, 36-43.

IN this parable Christ warns His servants against expecting to see in this world that un-mixedly good condition of society which will at length be brought about in the world to come. The kingdom of heaven is to have universal sway, it is to stand without rival and without mixture of evil, but the time is not yet. Those who are themselves within this kingdom must beware of acting as if the final judgment were already passed.

At all times those who believe in God have been perplexed by the fact that this world is so far from a condition of unmingled good. Is it not God's world? He could not sow bad seed. Whence then the tares? Sometimes this has pressed very heavily on the faith of men. It seems so unaccountable a thing that the field of God should not produce an unexceptionable harvest. We believe that God created the world, and created it for a purpose, and originated whatever was needful for the accomplishment of this purpose. Whatever has proceeded from Him can have been only good. No degenerate or noxious grain can have escaped His hand. And yet, look

at the result. How difficult in some parts of the field to see any fruit of God's sowing; how mixed everywhere is the evidence that this is God's field. Is it not the ill-cultivated patch of a careless proprietor, of the ill-conditioned, unworkable tract on which the wealthy owner has not wasted the labor which might better be expended elsewhere! Has God mistaken the capabilities of His field, or does He not care to develop them? or does He like this mingled crop? Does He not sympathize with His servants when they grieve over this sad waste? Has murder a horror only for us? does falsehood excite no indignation but in us? are violence and lust, disease and wretchedness matters of indifference to God? What do we see in the world? Centuries of folly, passion, toil, and anguish; countries desolated by the vices of their inhabitants; diseases which the most skilful cannot alleviate, nor the most callous view without a shudder; sorrow and sin more bitter, more cruel, more appalling than any disease. And this is the lot of God; here He delights to dwell. On no field of all His possessions has He spent more. Well may we join with the servants and say, "Sir, didst not Thou sow good seed in Thy field? From whence then hath it tares?"

But Christ comes and inaugurates a new order of things, and all evil will disappear from earth. Man's natural condition is but the dark background on which the saving grace of God may

display its brilliant effects. God Himself comes and dwells with men, rolling back the heavy darkness with the light of His presence and wisdom, infusing His own life into all. Now will the earth yield her increase. Alas! the failure of the harvest of God is in many respects even more conspicuous in the Church of Christ than in the non-Christian world. The very method adopted to redeem the failure of the original creation seems itself also to be in great part failure. We are perplexed when we find wild and useless vegetation in the outlying wilderness, but when we enter the garden of God, and within that redeemed enclosure still find weeds and disorder, our perplexity deepens into dismay. Yet the fact is that, with scarcely an exception, all the useless and pernicious plants found outside Christendom are found also within. Where is there to be found a more passionate greed of gain, or a more self-indulgent luxury, or a more thorough-going worldliness than among the masses of the trading Christian races? The gambling, the unscrupulous hasting to be rich, the cruel and heart-hardening selfishness that abound in our own society are only made more deceptive and dangerous by being crossed with plants of heavenly origin, and by disguising their true nature under the flowers of Christian utterances, occasional charities, seeming repentances, and ineffective purposing of better things. Lust and



villainy, fraud, malice, cruelty,—these noxious plants flourish within as without the Christian pale. And it is within Christendom we must look, if we would see some of the worst species of human iniquity. One is ashamed to read the history of the Church. Beside the good corn whose full ear bends in humble maturity of service, the deadly plant of delusive self-righteousness rears its pretentious and empty head. Ignorance, fear, and self-seeking have imitated every Christian grace, till the whole ground is covered with an overgrowth that hides from the eye the healthy plants of Christ's own sowing. Insincerity, superstition, obscurantism, intolerance, pious fraud, the prostitution of the highest interests of men to aims the most contemptible and vile, the disguising of a rotten character under a professed faith and hope of the most elevating and glorious kind,—these are the plants which flourish in the garden of God. All that is double, all that is mean, all that is craven, all that is shallow and earthly in human nature, seems to be stimulated by this cultivated soil. The field which was to be the nursery of free souls who, with eyes unscaled to see the true beauty of eternal goodness, should devote themselves with courage and generosity to the common good, has become a paddock in which the timorous seek refuge from a future they dread, and in which every low desire thinks it may burrow with impunity.

Looking at Christendom as it actually is, we may well ask, Is this what Christ sowed? Is this what He has produced on earth? Is this the kind of Christendom He intended? "Sir, did'st not Thou sow good seed in Thy field? From whence then hath it tares?"

The explanation of this disappointing state of matters is given in the words, "An enemy hath done this." It is not the result of Christianity, but of agencies opposed to Christianity. To sow a neighbor's field with noxious seed is in some countries a common device for venting spite or wreaking vengeance; and a more villainous injury can scarcely be imagined. It blasts hope; it is a long grievance, daily meeting the eye and wearing out the spirit till the harvest; it spoils the crop and injures the soil. It seems to say that all this time, from day to day, I have an enemy who hates me, so that there can be no truer joy to him than that which gives me sorrow. He cannot be happy if I am. My happiness is his misery; my misery his greatest happiness. This is his spirit, the spirit of the Evil One, by whomsoever shown; a spirit not wholly absent from our relations with other men, but betrayed even when we suppose ourselves to be animated with righteous indignation or warrantable revenge.

There is something characteristically devilish too, in the deed being done "when men slept;"

when the sun has gone down and the wrath of man begins to quiet and cool ; when men of right mind are resolving not to act in heat, or be provoked to unworthy and low-toned iniquities, but to think over their matters ; when they are perhaps dreaming that they are once again boys together, and walking folded in one another's arms ; when the stillness and solemn grandeur of night rebuke the loud clamor and petty wranglings of men ; when, at least, a pause is given to sin, this spirit's malignity tires not, but like the beasts of prey is roused to a livelier activity, and recognizes the darkness and quiet as his peculiar season. In him there is no folding of his hands from evil, no wearying, no hesitation in his course, no questioning whether, after all, this is not too bad, no desire to mingle with it a little good, no desire of rest or forgetfulness, but the grateful memory of past wickedness inciting him to new iniquities.

Such being the state of the field, and such its cause, what are the servants to do ? " Wilt Thou that we go and gather out these tares ? " Men are ever for prompt measures. " Lord, wilt Thou that we command fire to come down from heaven and consume them ? " Few understand the sparing of profligate cities for the sake of ten righteous men. We inwardly grudge that there should be so little difference now manifested between God's treatment of the righteous and the wicked ; and

that it should only at intervals appear that the former are His peculiar possession. Did our feelings rule the world, we should allow very few tares to appear. We cannot wait, but must anticipate the harvest. This and that other effective propagator of falsehood, would it not be well if he were out of the way? Would not good men come to a quicker and more fruitful maturity, were they not continually damaged by the blighting influences of skeptical literature, worldly society, superficial religionists?

“Let both grow together until the harvest,” is the law of the Master. Again and again the Church has, in the face of this parable, taken upon her to root out infidels and heretics. The reasoning has been summary: We are Christ’s, these men are Satan’s, let us destroy them. All such attempts violently to hasten the consummation, and to make the field of the world appear uniform, have most disastrously hindered the growth of true religion. The servants have wrought a more frightful desolation and barrenness in the field than anything which could have resulted from the existence of the tares.

It is, indeed, not always easy to know how far we should act upon the acknowledged fact of a man’s ungodliness. In this country there is a strong feeling against opinions which are believed to be dangerous; perhaps it may be said that the animosity excited by a man’s profession of

atheism is more vehement and active than that which immorality excites. And though, happily, we do not now go so far as to remove such persons from the world, we do not scruple to visit them with serious social and civil disabilities. Now this parable emits the law regarding such persons. It does not say the world is as it ought to be; it does not say there is no distinction, or a very insignificant one, between good and bad men, or between Christians and atheists; but it enjoins upon us the necessity of refraining from acting upon this distinction to the injury of any. Punishments must be inflicted by society on its injurious members, but not on the score of their ungodliness or unprofitableness in Christ's kingdom. The distinction between a criminal and a benefactor of his country may not be so great as between a ripe Christian and a full-blown atheist; but while we are compelled to act upon the former distinction, and pluck up the criminal from his place, and banish him from our society, the latter distinction is not fully manifested, and must not be fully acted upon in this world. The man who habitually swears, or leads a grossly immoral life, or propagates infidelity, may do a great deal more harm than the starving boy who steals a loaf; but we are called upon to punish the latter and not the former. And in so far as we damage the prospects, or asperse the good name, of any man because we consider him

"tares," and not wheat, in so far we fly in the face of this parable.

The reasonableness of this method of delay is sufficiently obvious. Within the Church itself it is often impossible even to be as sure as the servants of the parable were that there is darnel sown among the wheat, or at least to discriminate between the wheat and the darnel. An opinion, or a practise, which is at first sight condemned as scandalous or full of danger, may turn out to be sound and wholesome. But if no time be allowed it to grow, if it be summarily pronounced tares, and thrown over the hedge, the good fruit it might have borne is thrown away with it. Truth may be in the minority—always is at first in the minority; and if, as the servants view the field, they merely take a vote as to what is wholesome and what poisonous, they are likely enough to do evil rather than good.

And even where it is certain that evil has sprung up in the Church, it is a further question whether it should be summarily removed. This parable, it is true, is not the guide for the action of the rulers of the Church towards its members; but, indirectly, a warning against hasty action is given to those in authority. False doctrine may sometimes be more easily got rid of, if it be regarded in silence, or with a few words of convincing exposure, than if it be signalized with assault. No man who had any regard for his field would

carry a seeding thistle through every part of it, and give it a shake in every corner.

But our Lord Himself in the parable assigns two reasons for this abstinence from immediate action. First, you are not to root up tares, because you will inevitably root up good corn with them. It is almost impossible to pull up a single stalk of corn by the root; you may break it off, but if you take up its root you are almost sure to bring away with it a number of other stalks and a mass of soil. The one root refuses to be detached from the rest—a striking representation of what happens when injury is inflicted on any member of society. You cannot injure one man and one only. In him you strike his children, his friends, his followers if he be a man of influence. No man is so forlorn that none will be made lonelier by his death, or be embittered or saddened by his misfortune. We live for the most part in little circles, bound one to the other by indissoluble relationships, nurtured from one soil, and matured by common interests and feelings. And these circles are not separate from one another, but some member of your circle belongs also to another; and so the whole world is linked together, and you cannot put forth your hand and strike any man whose pain shall not be felt by others, nor thrust him from you without repelling all who are attached to him. And of those who are attached to him,

are you sure there are none who belong to the kingdom, no little blade springing up by his root, which, did you let it grow, would abound in fruit? For, that a man is evil himself, is no proof that all his connections are evil. On the contrary, an ungodly man will often cling to those who belong to the kingdom, as if somehow they must find entrance for him along with themselves. A father who cannot change his own ways nor yield the opinions of his youth, seeks to protect his children from the influences that destroyed himself, and to atone for his own barrenness by their productiveness. Some who are held as by a terrible fatality from winning the kingdom, will yet entreat others to use violence to enter it. Even the most profligate have commonly some one ripe and living soul devoted to them, who could wish that himself were accursed for their kinsmen according to the flesh.

But this first reason rests upon the second: and that is, that the time is coming when the distinction between the wheat and the tares is to be acted upon. Only let a man accept the account here given of the end of the tares, and he will have very little desire to anticipate or hasten that end. When God says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," we feel that the darkest injustice and wrong-doing will be adequately taken account of. When we reflect that what has roused our indignation has also been observed



by God, and will be dealt with by Him, not only is our indignation mitigated, but, in view of the judgment of God, our pity is moved towards the transgressor. We were about to punish as if we were the offended party, as if we saw the matter in all its bearings and could justly judge it, and as if we had the right punishment at hand; but when this final judgment looms in sight we see how different are God's judgments and God's punishments from ours, and an awful pity possesses us. Believe that the bar of God lies across the path of each of us, believe that a veritable sifting of men is to be, and that all men are to be allotted to suitable destinies, and compassion will extinguish every other feeling you may have cherished towards the wicked. The position in which we in this life are is full of awe, and fitted also to engender in us the tenderest feelings one towards another—growing up as we are side by side, but with destinies perhaps immeasurably wide asunder; here for a little united root to root, and yet, it may be, severed to all eternity. Could any position be better calculated to banish from our minds all indifference to one another's prospects, all sullen and revengeful feelings, all variance and hatred, and to quicken within us a true affection and compassion, a considerate and helpful tenderness?

The bearing of this parable, then, on ourselves cannot be mistaken. Wheat and darnel, it says,

are almost identical in appearance, and are, in the meantime, treated as if the one was as valuable as the other; but let them grow, and the fruit will prove that the root principle of the one is different as possible from the other; the one is good food, the other poison. And they will eventually be treated accordingly. Everything must ultimately find its place according to its nature; not according to its appearance, nor according to any pretensions put forward in its behalf, but only and simply according to its own real character and quality. Each of us is growing *to* something, and from some root. No one may be able to say—perhaps you yourself are unable to say—to which kind and to what root you belong; perhaps you cannot confidently affirm what it is to which you are growing, but beneath all appearances there is in you a real character, a root that determines what you shall grow to. As we grow up in society together, one man is in the main very like another. Of two of your friends, it may be the one who makes least profession of religion that you would go to in a difficulty in which much generous help and toil are needed. Take a regiment of soldiers or a ship's crew, and you may find the ungodly as brave and self-sacrificing in action, as observant of discipline as the others. There may be little to show that there is a radical difference in character; sometimes, of course, this difference

is very rapidly manifested, but in general there is so much similarity as to make it notorious that the Church is not distinctly marked off from the world. Society does resemble a field in which the wheat and the darnel are still in the blade, and can be discriminated only by a very careful observer.

So that, first, this is apt to make the darnel think itself as good as the wheat. If we merely look at appearances we are apt to think that, take us all round, there is not much to choose between the wheat and us. We see in truly Christian people evil tempers, a revengeful, tyrannical, ungenerous spirit, we detect bitterness and meanness in them, sometimes sensuality, and a keen eye for worldly advantage, and we are encouraged to believe that really we stand comparison with them very favorably. So no doubt you do. The world would be insufferable if all men had the spirit which many Christians show. But that is not the point. The question is not whether you are not at present, to all appearance, as useful and pleasant a member of society as they; but the question is, whether there is not that in them which will grow to good, and whether there is not that in you which will grow to evil. Do you, that is to say, sufficiently consider this parable, which most frankly admits that at present, so far as things have yet grown, there may be no very marked difference between

the children of the kingdom and others, but at the same time emphatically declares that the root is different, and that, therefore, the life is really of a different quality, and will in the long run *appear* to be different? The question is, what is your root? What is it that is producing the actual life you are making, and the actual character you are growing into? What is the motive power? Is it mere desire to get on, or craving for a good position among men? Is it respect for your own good name? or are you a child of the kingdom? Are you the result of the word of the kingdom? that is, is your conduct being more and more animated and regulated, and is your character being more and more formed, by the belief that God calls you to live for Him and for eternity? Do you like this world really better than one in which you have a hope only of spiritual joys, of true fellowship with God, and holiness of heart? Can you make good to your own mind, that in some quite intelligible sense you are rooted in Christ, and grow out of Him? It is the root you live from which will eventually show itself in you, and determine your eternal position.

Again, the urgency of the call to Christ is deadened by the fact that we are not *treated* differently at present. Men argue: we get on well enough now, and the future will take care of itself. But this is to brush aside at a blow all that we are told of the connection of the present

with the future. This state bears to a coming world the relation which seed-time bears to harvest. No violence will be done to you at present to convince you that you are useless to God. No judgment will be declared, no punishment inflicted—that were out of season, for in this life we are left to choose freely and without compulsion, whether we desire to be in God's kingdom or not. In this life you must judge yourself and do violence to yourself. But this argues nothing regarding the future life. It is only then a beginning is made of treatment corresponding to character.

Lastly, not only is the darnel apt to think itself as good as the wheat, but the wheat is apt to think itself no better than the darnel. You can never outstrip others in good as you would like. You are troubled because they seem to be as regular, as zealous, as successful in duty as you. Possibly, too, they are not only as judicious in conduct, as generous, as true, of as good report as yourselves, but, moreover, exercise a healthier influence than you do on those they live with. Some natural infirmity of temper has fixed its indelible brand on you, something which makes you less attractive and less influential than you might otherwise be. Or perhaps you are choked by uncongenial surroundings, kept down in growth by the tares around you, often betrayed into sins which better company would have made

impossible. Are you somehow continually kept back from growing to all you feel you might grow to? Is there good in you that has never yet been elicited? Look then to the end, when "the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." Be sure only that there is that in you which will shine forth if the hindrances and blinds are removed. There is no change to pass on the wheat; but only the tares shall be taken away, and it will stand revealed, good corn. Bring forth your fruit in patience: maintain the real distinction between good and evil, and at last it will be apparent.

## THE MUSTARD SEED.

MATT. xiii. 31, 32.

NEITHER the parable of the Sower nor the parable of the Tares was calculated to elate those who were interested in the kingdom of heaven. The hindrances and disappointments incident to the establishment of that kingdom were too plainly stated to be gratifying. It was not exhilarating to the hearers of these parables to learn that the state of things to which they had eagerly looked forward as the realization of their ideal, and the embodiment of all excellence, could not be actually achieved on earth. In this parable of the mustard seed our Lord turns the other side of the picture, and affirms that the little movement already stirring society would grow to vast dimensions ; that the influences He was introducing so unobtrusively into human history were vital, and would one day command attention and be productive of untold good. He does not anticipate the parable of the leaven, and explain the precise mode of the spread of Christianity, but merely predicts the fact of its growth. He invites us to compare the visible cause with the visible result ; he directs our thoughts to the two

facts of the small beginning and the ultimate grandeur of the kingdom of heaven, and suggests that the reason of this growth is that the originating principle of the kingdom has vitality in it.

It is the study of the laws of growth which in recent years, has given so great an impulse to human knowledge and to the delight men find in nature. How this world has come to be what it is; its rude and unpromising beginnings, and its steady progress towards perfection; the development of an infinitely various and complicated life from a few rudimentary forms;—these have been the commonest subjects of scientific investigation. It has been shown that everything we are ourselves now connected with has grown out of something which went before; that nothing is self-originated. The growth of languages and religions, of customs and forms of government, of races and nations, has been traced; and a new interest has thus been imparted to all things, for everything is found to have a history which carries us back to the most unlikely roots, and is full of surprises. Creation excites wonder; but growth excites an intelligent admiration and wonder as well. For, after all investigation and exposition of its laws, growth remains marvelous. That the swift-flying bird, sensitive to the remotest atmospheric changes, should grow out of the motionless, strictly encased egg, is always an astonishment. That the wide-branching tree, hiding the



sky with its foliage, should be the product of a small, insignificantly shaped seed, never ceases to excite wonder. Nothing could well be more unlike the bird than the egg; nothing less like a tree than the seed it has grown out of; but by an unseen and ultimately inscrutable force the egg becomes a bird, and the seed grows into a tree. To see the stateliest pile of building filling the space which before was empty, makes an appeal to the imagination: that kind of increase we seem to understand; stone is added to stone by the will and toil of man. But when we look at the deeply-rooted and wide-branching tree, and think of the tiny seed from which all this sprang without human will or toil, but by an internal vitality of its own, we are confronted by the most mysterious and fascinating of all things, the life that lies unseen in nature.

In the difference, then, between the beginning and the maturity of our Lord's kingdom there was nothing exceptional. The same difference may be observed in the case of almost every person or influence that has greatly helped mankind. Many of the inventions to which we are hourly indebted entered the world like little seeds casually blown to their resting-place; they floated on, unheeded, unobserved, till at last, apparently by the merest chance, they caught somewhere, and became productive. It is the very commonness of this career, from small to great, to which our Lord appeals

for the encouragement of His disciples. Here is the least among seeds; it flies before your breath; it is not noticed in the balance; a miser would scarce trouble himself to blow it from the scale; the hungry bird will not pause in his flight to pick it up; but let a few years go by, and that seed shall have become a tree, in which the birds of the air may lodge, and which no force can uproot. The seed, as you now see it, is doing and can do nothing that the tree does; it casts no shade, it shelters no birds, it yields no fruit or timber, it does not fill the eye and complete the landscape; but give it time, and it will do all these things, as nothing else will or can.

In this parable, then, our Lord gave expression to three of the ideas which frequently recurred to His mind regarding the kingdom of heaven:—1st. Its present apparent insignificance; 2d. Its vitality; 3d. Its future grandeur.

1. Our Lord recognized that to the un-instructed, ordinary observer His kingdom must in its origin appear insignificant, "the least of all seeds." It might seem less likely to prevail, and to become a universal benefit, than some other contemporary systems or influences. In point of fact, so extravagant did Christ's claim to be a benefactor of the race appear, that those who wished to mock Him could devise no more telling and bitter taunt than to bow before Him and salute Him as a king. That such a tame-spirited,

forsaken person should attain a place among the strong-handed rulers of the world seemed altogether too preposterous. The Roman magistrate, before whom He was arraigned on the charge of rebellion against Cæsar, found it difficult to treat the charge seriously. Open the histories of His time, and your eyes are dazzled with the magnificence of other monarchs, and the magnitude of their words, but He is barely named—so little known, that He is sometimes misnamed through sheer ignorance. It was no discredit to the most learned and accurate of historians to know nothing of Jesus Christ. This obscurity and insignificance would not have been disconcerting to the followers of a mere teacher, for the best teaching is rarely appreciated in the first generation; but as our Lord claimed to be a lawgiver and real king, it certainly did not bode well for His kingdom that during His lifetime so few obeyed or even knew Him.

The very circumstance that He was a Jew might have seemed to those of His contemporaries who were best able to judge, enough in itself to ensure the defeat of any purpose of universal sway. The exclusive character of the religious and social ideas of the Jew, and the hostility with which this exclusiveness was returned by other nations, seemed to make it most improbable that all men should be brought into one common brotherhood and community by a Jew. More-

over, Jesus Himself was no Hellenist, whose Jewish ideas might have been modified by Greek learning and cosmopolitan associations and customs; but He was a Jew of purest blood and upbringing, educated in all Jewish customs and ideas, and subjected to the ordinary Jewish influences, never visiting other lands, and rarely speaking to any but His own countrymen. So far as we know, He made no inquiries into the state of other countries, and read no books to inform Himself; He did not send emissaries to Rome, inviting men to consider His claims; He made no overtures of any kind to men at a distance;—that is to say, He did not present Himself as a grown tree branching friendly outwards, to which might flock the birds of the air which had been driven out by the winter of their own land, and had wandered far in search of food, and were weary from their long flight.

Even among His own people, from whom He might have expected a hearty welcome and loyal advocacy, He met with either contemptuous neglect or positive opposition. He obtained no recognized standing, even among the Jews. Those who formed the opinions of society pronounced Him an impostor, and the people were so completely convinced by them, that they clamored for His death. The few who were attached to Him, and who thoroughly believed in His sincerity and spiritual greatness, persistently

misunderstood the essential parts of His purpose and teaching. They could not, even to the last, rid their minds of the natural impression that His being crucified as a malefactor was the end of all their hopes. And is it not probable that even Jesus Himself, as He was ignominiously hurried to His death by a handful of Roman soldiers, may have been tempted to think, What is there in this to regenerate a world? Will such an everyday incident even be remembered next Pass-over? Certainly, so far as appearances went, and in the judgment of all who saw and were interested, His kingdom was at that time comparable to anything but a firmly-rooted and flourishing tree.

After the resurrection of Christ, His kingdom became slightly more visible, but its prospects must still have seemed extremely doubtful. A handful of men, none of them having much weight in the community, or being in any way remarkable, compose the force which is to conquer the world. To win a single soul to an unpopular cause is difficult, but these men were summoned to the task of converting all nations. They had no ancient institutions, no well-tried methods, no strong associations, no funds, no friends to back them. On the contrary, everything seemed banded against them. Teachers, who disagreed in all else, combined to scorn the folly of the cross; emperors, who would allow every other

form of religion, could not tolerate that of Jesus. Everywhere the world was already preoccupied by ancient and jealously-guarded religions, by habits, and ideas, and traditions adverse to the spirit of Christ. The instrument, too, which was to convert the world seemed as powerless as the men who were to wield it. They were to tell of Jesus, of His life, His death, His resurrection. Was it not vain to expect that remote and barbarous races would become so attached to a person they had never seen, that they would govern their passions and amend their lives for His sake? Was it likely that, on the word of unknown men, the person of an unknown man should become the center of the world, commanding the adherence of all, and imparting to all the most powerful influences?

2. But at the very moment when our Lord was most conscious of the poor figure His kingdom made in the eyes of men, He was absolutely confident of its final greatness, because, small as it was, *it was of the nature of seed*. It had a vital force in it that nothing could kill; a germinating and expansive power which would only be quickened by opposition. His own death, the obscurity and limitation to which His cause was at first subjected, were not, He knew, the first symptoms of permanent oblivion, but were only the sowing of the seed. He was no more anxious than the farmer is who, for the first week

or two, sees no appearance of his plants above ground. Our Lord knew that, could He only get His kingdom accepted at even, one small point of earth, the growth would inevitably and in good time follow.

There are certain human qualities, ideas, utterances, and acts which are vital and must grow. They have in them an expansive, living energy; they sink into the hearts and minds of men, and propagate a lasting influence. What, then, is the vital element in Christianity? What is it that has given permanence and growth to the kingdom of Christ? What did Christ plant that no one else has planted? What is it that keeps Him in undying remembrance, and gathers from each new generation fresh subjects for His kingdom? It is not the wisdom and beauty of His teaching. That might have led us to immortalize His words by reprinting and quoting them. Neither is it solely the holiness of His life, or the love He showed. These might have kindled in us admiration, but could never have prompted that real allegiance which is implied in a kingdom. But it is chiefly the revelation of God in Him which draws men to Him. In His death and resurrection we get assurance of Divine love and Divine power abiding in Him. It is God in Him that draws us. We cleave to him, because through Him we are lifted to God and to eternity. In His brief career He gives us a perception of the real-

ity of the spiritual world, the permanence of the individual, and the nearness and love of God, which nothing else gives us. In Him men meet a God satisfying all their expectations; so devoted to their interests, that He lives and dies with them, and for them; so hopeful regarding them, that He proclaims pardon and newness of life to sinners; so victorious over all the evils weighing upon man, that He conquers death itself, and throws open to all the gates of life everlasting.

The seed is the highest product of the plant: the fruit is but the accompaniment of the seed; it is into the seed that the plant each year puts its life. So in man, the ripest product of the individual, the actions or words into which he gathers up his whole character and strength,—it is these which are vital and germinant. The vital element in the life of Christ cannot be mistaken: it was, in a word, the Divine Son giving Himself for us; God expressing the fulness of Divine Sympathy and sacrifice in our behalf—a seed, surely, from which great things must spring.

3. Our Lord points to the eventual greatness of His kingdom. The despised seed, ground into the soil under the heel of contempt and hatred, will become a tree, whose leaves shall be for the healing of the nations. The disciples do not seem to have gathered from this parable



the encouragement which was laid up for them in it; but an instructed onlooker might have admonished the crucifiers of the Lord that they were fulfilling His words—"That cross which you are setting up, and which you will take down before the sun is set, shall stand in the thought of countless millions as the point of earth most illuminated by the light of heaven; that blood which you are shedding, as you would pour water out of your way on the ground, is to be recognized by your fellow-men and by God as precious, as that by which the souls of men are redeemed and purified."

The kingdom of heaven has indeed become a tree. It would be difficult to count even the greater branches of it; difficult to number the various twigs which depend upon the central stem; impossible to count the leaves or to form an idea of the fruit which, through past years, has gradually ripened and fallen from it. This religion which emanated from a country so detested by the surrounding nations that they might be expected to say of it, as the Jews themselves of Nazareth, "Can any good thing come out of Judea?"—this religion propagated by Jews who had become Christians, so that being excommunicated by their own countrymen, and naturally hated by all other people, they seemed the most unlikely instruments to commend new ideas; this religion which could

offer no high posts or secular rewards, and numbered few wise, wealthy, or noble among its adherents; which would not tolerate other religions, and yet proclaimed doctrines which excited the ridicule of the educated; which demanded from all alike, not only an absolutely pure morality and a repulsive and humbling self-renunciation, but a newness of spirit impossible to the natural man; this religion which seemed to have everything against it, which seemed like a sickly child which it was scarcely worth calling by a name to be remembered as a living thing,—this has grown to be the greatest of all powers for good in the world. The seed determines the character of all that springs from it; the quality of the fruit and its abundance may vary with the nature of the soil and with the presence or absence of careful cultivation and other advantages, but the tree will still be recognizable as of that kind to which the seed belonged. And as the seed of the kingdom of heaven was love and holiness and Divine power, so have similar fruits been borne by men wherever the kingdom has come. The outmost branch, looking in an opposite direction from the distant branches on the other side of the tree, and apparently quite dissociated from these branches, is still identified with them by the fruit it bears. Wherever in all these past ages, and in all the scattered countries

of Christendom, there has been a Christ-like life; wherever sinners have been drawn to love God and hate their sin through the knowledge of the cross; wherever in hope of a blessed immortality men have borne the sorrows of time without bitterness, and committed their dead to the grave in expectation of a life beyond,—there the seed Christ sowed has been showing its permanent vitality.

The figure of the tree inevitably suggests other considerations regarding the Church, besides those which are directly taught in the parable. The tree, with its single stem and countless branches, is only too true a picture of the diverging belief and worship of those who own a common root in Christ. Sometimes, indeed, one is tempted to compare the Church to one of those trees in which the branches diverge as soon as they appear above ground, so that you cannot tell whether the tree is really one or many. In some of its aspects, again, the church resembles the huge tree that stands on the village green, looking benignly down on the joys of the young, and giving shade and shelter to the aged, seeing generation after generation drop away like its own leaves, but itself living through all with the freshness of its early days; its lower bark only marked by the ambition of those who have sought to identify their now scarcely legible

names with its undecaying life, but whose work has after all not entered into the life of the tree, but only marred its external hull. Again, we see that some of the lowest, earliest grown branches are quite dead or drooping; that Christianity has passed from the people among whom it first found root, and that satyrs dance where the praises of Christ were once sung. It would almost seem as if there were a melancholy accuracy in the figure used in the parable, and that the tree, having once attained its full dimensions, grows no more. After some years the rapid growth which was so striking in the young tree is no longer discernible. It maintains equal or perhaps stronger life, but spring after spring you look in vain for any discernible increase in size. But certain it is that this plant which Christ planted has shown vitality, drawing nutriment from every soil in which it has been tried, and assimilating to its own life and substance all that is good in the soil, using the faculties and accomplishments, the literary or artistic or commercial leanings and gifts of the various races so as to further the true welfare of men; gathering strength from sunshine and storm alike, cherishing a hidden life through the long winters when every branch seemed hopelessly dead, and drawing supplies of vitalizing moisture from sources beyond the ken of man when the scorching heats threatened to

wither up every living leaf. The tree is growing now, gradually absorbing into itself all the widening thoughts of men, and by the chemistry of its own life extracting nutriment from criticism, from philosophy, from research, from social and political movements, from everything that forms the great stirring human world in which it is rooted ; not afraid to stand out in the open and face the day, but gaining vigor from every brisker air that tosses its branches.

This parable was spoken for the encouragement of the disciples: it is needed still for the encouragement of all who are interested in the extension of Christ's kingdom. In many respects our outlook is even more hopeless than that of the first disciples. The novelty, the first enthusiasm, the external signs, are all gone ; the solidarity of the Church is also gone, and in its place we have to overcome the discrediting exhibitions of discord and internal conflict, as well as the weakening influence of skepticism, and the slowly corroding materialism that is destroying the very foundations of religion. The missionary enterprise of the first disciples seems never to have extended very far from the Mediterranean coasts. They were unaware of the vast multitudes beyond, and of the solidity and attractiveness of some of the religions already in occupation ; whereas to the eye of the modern Church populations are disclosed, numbered by hundreds of

millions, and adhering to religions more ancient and more outwardly impressive than our own. Our zeal, too, is slackened by the very fact that all this yet remains to be done; that Christianity should have been growing for nearly two thousand years, and that it has not yet convinced all men of its superiority, and that in places where it has been most ardently received it has borne fruit of which every man must feel ashamed.

To all persons who are disheartened, whether by the apparent fruitlessness of their own efforts or by the slow growth of the Church at large, this parable says, You must measure things not by their size, but by their vitality. What you can do may be very little, and once it is done there may be no sign of results; but if you put yourself into it, if it come from the heart—a heart whose earnestness and hope are the result of contact with Christ—then fruit will one day be borne. You must have some imagination. You must have some faith that will enable you to wait patiently for fruit. Make sure that what you sow is good seed; that what you teach your children is true; that what you strive to introduce into society is sound and helpful; that the ideas you propagate, the charity you support, the industry you seek to advance, are all such as belong to the kingdom of Christ, and you may be sure your labor is not lost. You may not see the results of your actions. You may not see full grown the

trees of your planting, but your children will lie under their shade, and dream of your sheltering forethought, and strive to fulfil your best purposes. Do not be discouraged because all is not yet done on earth, and much remains for you to do ; do not be discouraged because there is room for sacrifice and faith, devotedness, and wisdom, and love, and skill. It is not hot-house results we seek to produce, nor, like the Indian jugglers, to make a tree visibly shoot up by sleight of hand. What we look for is the real growth of human good, and this can be accomplished by no rapid and magical processes, but only by the patient nutrition of the soil by all that is truest and deepest in human nature, and by all that is most real and most testing in human effort. Honestly seek the growth of this tree, and be not too greatly dismayed by the portentous difficulties of the task. "He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand, for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

In conclusion, is it not relevant to ask whether we have joined the Christian Church, because it is large, or because it is living? Simon in the temple held all Christendom in his arms, and yet

felt sure the redemption of the world was nigh. Is your faith like his? Is it the Person of Christ and not what has grown round His person that you cleave to? Do you find *that* in Christ which compels you to say that, though you were the only Christian, yourself the Church visible, you must abide by Him? Is there some independence in your choice, some individuality in your experience? Can you say, with some significance, "I know Him in whom I have believed"? or do you but adopt the fashion that prevails, and feel the propriety and safety of going with the majority? In any case it is well that you recognize that there is this tree planted by the Lord Himself, and still growing upon earth. There is upon earth a society of men not always easy to find, but in true sympathy with Him; a progress of human affairs to which He gave the initial impulse. There is on earth a tree, the seed of which is His own life, whose growing bulk embodies, from generation to generation, all that exists in the world of His purpose and work. The good He intended for men He deposited in that seed. He came to impart to men permanent blessings. He saw our condition, recognized what we needed, and introduced into the world what He knew would achieve the happiness of every one of us.



## THE LEAVEN.

MATT. xiii. 33.

THIS parable directs attention to two points connected with the spread of Christianity. It illustrates—

1. First, the *kind* of change which Christianity works in the world ; and

2. Second, the *method* by which this change is wrought.

1. First, our Lord here teaches that the change which He meant to effect in the world was a change, not so much of the outward form, as of the spirit and character of all things. The propagation of His influence is illustrated not by the figure of a woman taking a mass of dough and baking it up into new loaves of a shape hitherto unseen ; but by the figure of a woman putting that into the dough which alters the character of the whole mass. She may set on the table loaves that are to all appearance the same as the old, but no one will taste them without perceiving the difference. The old shapes are retained, the familiar marks appear still on the loaves, but it is a different bread. The appearance remains the same, the reality is altered. The form is retained, but the character is changed.

There are two ways in which you may revolutionize any country or society. You may either pull down all the old forms of government, or you may fill them with men of a different spirit. If an empire is going to ruin, you may either change the empire into a republic, or you may put the right man in the office of emperor. If any society or club or association has become effete and a nuisance, doing harm instead of good, you may reform it either by revising its constitution, making new laws and regulations, and so making it a new society, or you may fill its official positions with men of a right spirit, leaving its form of constitution untouched. A watch stops, and somebody tells you it needs new works, but the watchmaker tells you it only needs cleaning. A machine refuses to work, and people think the construction is wrong, but the skilled mechanic pushes aside the ignorant crowd and puts all to rights with a few drops of oil. "Your bread is unwholesome," says the public to the baker, and he says, "Well, I'll send you loaves of a new shape;" but the woman of the parable follows the wiser course of altering the quality of the bread.

Few distinctions are of wider application, few need more careful pondering by all of us whether in our social, political, or religious capacity. Many of us take a huge interest in the institutions of our country, and are ready to lay our finger on

this and that as needing reform. This parable should therefore haunt the ear, and always suggest the question: Is this or that institution radically bad? or, supposing good and wise men were working it, would it not serve a good purpose? What is wanted in the world is not new forms, but a new spirit in the present forms. New forms, new institutions, new regulations, new occupations, new trades, new ways of occupying our time, new customs are really as little to the purpose as putting the old make of bread into new shapes. What our Lord by this parable warns us to aim at and to look for is rather the possession which Christian feeling and views take of previously existing customs, institutions, relationships, occupations, than the new facts and habits to which Christian feeling gives birth. It is the regenerating rather than the creative power of Christ's Spirit that He dwells upon. His Spirit, He says, does not require a new channel to be dug for it; its fuller stream may flood the old banks, may wear out corners here and there, may break out in new directions, but in the main, the channel remains the same. The man has the same arteries, but now they are filled with health-giving blood. The lump is the same lump, and done up into the same old shapes, but it is all leavened now.

The coming of the kingdom of heaven does not then consist in an entire alteration of human

life, as we now know it. The kingdom of heaven comes not with observation, but is within you. It does not alter empires into republics, it does not abolish work and give us all ease, it does not find fault with the universal frame of things, or refuse to fit itself in with the world as it is; but it accepts things as it finds them, and leavens all it touches. As the outward forms of the world's business, its offices and dignities, its need of work and ways of working, would be little altered if all men were suddenly to become absolutely truthful or absolutely sober, so the change which Christ proposed to effect was of an inward, not of an outward kind. It was to be first in the individual, and only through the individual on society at large. Our Lord in establishing a kingdom on earth, did not intend to erect a vast organization over-against the world, but He meant to introduce into the world itself a leaven which should rule and subdue all to His own Spirit. The Church itself therefore may become too visible, has become in many respects too visible, and has thus unfortunately succeeded in at once separating itself from the world as a distinct and alien institution, and becoming entirely "of the world," by imitating the institutions, the ambitions, the power, the show of the world. It has learned to measure its success very largely by the bulk it occupies in the eyes of men, by its well-ordered services, its creeds and laws and courts; and it has

too much forgotten that its function is of quite another kind, namely, to be *hidden* among the flour.

2. Secondly, this parable pointedly directs attention to the precise method by which the kingdom of heaven is to grow; or, as we should more naturally say, by which the whole world is to be Christianized. To one who considers the probable future of any new or young force in the world, to one who stands beside the cradle of a new power and speculates on its future, there will occur several ways in which it may possibly prevail and attain universality. It may so commend itself to the common sense of men, or it may so appeal to their regard to their own interests, as to win universal acceptance. Railways, banks, insurance companies, do not need statutes compelling men to use them; they win their way by their own intrinsic advantages. There have been governments so wisely administered, that men not naturally subject to them have sought to be taken under their protection for the sake of advantages accruing. Some kingdoms have thus been largely extended; but more commonly they have been extended by the sword, by the strong hand. Not by this latter method would Christ have His religion propagated. Yet the idea that men can somehow be compelled to accept the truth, seems never to be quite eradicated from the human mind. Very slowly is it recognized

that to support a religion by any kind of force instead of by reason alone, is to admit that reason condemns it. The methods of compulsion change; the coarser forms of compulsion, the sword and the stake, give place; but more disguised and less startling forms of compulsion remain, equally opposed to the spirit of Christ.

The spread of Christianity, then, is illustrated in this parable, not by the propagation of fruit trees, nor even by the sowing of seed, but by the leavening of a mass of dough. Religion, that is to say, spreads not by a fresh sowing in each case, but by contagion. No doubt there is a direct agency of God in each case, but God works through natural means; and the natural means here pointed at is personal influence. And it is not the agency of God in the matter which our Lord wishes here to illustrate, and therefore He says nothing about it. He is not careful to guard Himself against misrepresentation by completing in every utterance a full statement of the whole truth, but presses one point at a time; and the point He here presses is, that He depends upon personal influence for the spread of His Spirit. The Church often trusts to massive and wealthy organizations, to methods which are calculated to strike every eye; but according to the Head of the Church His religion and spirit are to be propagated by an influence which operates like an infectious disease, invisible, with-

out apparatus and pompous equipment, succeeding all the better where it is least observed. Our Lord bases His expectation of the extension of His Spirit throughout the world not upon any grand and powerful institutions, not on national establishments of religion or any such means, but on the secret, unnoticed influence of man upon man.

And indeed there exists no mightier power for good or evil than personal influence. Take even those who least intend to influence you and seem least capable of it. The little child that cannot stand alone will work that tenderness in the heart of a ruffian which no acts of parliament or prison discipline have availed to work. The wail of the suffering infant will bring a new spirit into the man whom the strongest police regulations have tended only to harden and make more defiant and embittered. By his confidence in your word, the child is a more effectual monitor of truthfulness than the keen or suspicious eye of the grown man who distrusts you: the child's recklessness of to-morrow, his short sadnesses and soon recovered smiles, his ignorance of the world and the world's misery, are the proper balance of your anxiety, and insinuate into your heart some measure of his own freshness and hope. Or what can reflect more light upon God's patience with ourselves than the unwearying love and repeated forgiveness that a child demands, and the long doubting with which we wait for

the fruit of years of training? So that it is hard to say whether the parent has more influence on the child, or the child on the parent? Or take those who have been pushed aside from the busy world by ill-health or misfortune—have not their unmurmuring patience, their Christian hope, their need of our compassion, done much to mold our spirits to a sober and chastened habit? have they not imparted to us the spirit of Christ, and cherished within us a true recognition of what is essential and what accidental, what good and what evil in this world?

What, then, does the parable teach us regarding the operation of this influence? It teaches us, first, that there must be a *mixing*; that is to say, there must be contact of the closest kind between those who are and those who are not the subjects of Christ. Manifestly, no good is done by the leaven while it lies by itself; it might as well be chalk or anything else. It must be mixed with the flour. So must Christians be kneaded up together with all kinds of annoying and provoking and uncongenial people, that the spirit of Christ which they bear may become universal. Had our Lord not eaten with publicans and sinners; had He sensitively shrunk from the rough and irreverent handling He received among coarse men who called Him "Samaritan," "devil," and "sot;" had He secluded Himself in the appreciative household of Bethany; had He not



made Himself the most accessible Person, little of His Spirit would have passed into other men. Other things being equal, the effect of Christian character varies with the thoroughness of the mixing. It is so with all personal influence. The depth of the love, the closeness of the intimacy, the frequency and thoroughness of the intercourse, is the measure of the effect produced. In a country such as our own, in which the population is dense, and in which an unobstructed communication subsists between man and man, things constantly tend to equalize; and what yesterday was the property of one person is to-day enjoyed by thousands. And precisely as a fashion or a contagious disease passes from man to man, with inconceivable and sometimes appalling rapidity, so does evil or good example propagate itself with as certain and speedy an increase. And this it does all the more effectually because insensibly; because we do not brace ourselves to resist this subtle atmospheric influence, nor wash our hands with any disinfectant provided against these imperceptible stains. There is no quarantine for the moral leper, nor any desert in the moral world where a man can be evil for himself alone.

For this mixing is provided for in various ways. It is provided for by *nature*, which sets us in families and mixes us up in all the familiarities and intimacies of domestic life; and by *society*, which compels us, in the prosecution of our

ordinary callings, to come into contact with one another of a close and influential kind. One part of the world is "mixed" with other parts by commerce, by colonization, by conquest, so that there exists a ceaseless giving and taking of good and evil. One generation is mixed with others by reading their history and their literary remains, and by inheriting their traditions and their long established usages. So that whether we will or no this mixing goes on, and we can as little prevent certain results arising from this intercourse as we can prevent our persons from giving off heat when we enter an atmosphere colder than ourselves. We find it to be true that

"The world's infectious: few bring back at eve  
Immaculate the manners of the morn.  
Something we thought is blotted: we resolv'd,  
Is shaken: we renounced, returns again.  
Each salutation may slide in a sin  
Unthought before, or fix a former flaw."

But beyond nature's provision, beyond the *unavoidable* contact with our fellow-men to which we are all compelled, there are voluntary friendships and associations into which we enter, and casual meetings which we unawares are thrown into. Such casual and passing acquaintanceships have very frequently illustrated the truth of this parable, and have been the means of imparting the Spirit of Christ in very unlikely quarters. And it would help us to use wisely such acci-

dental opportunities if we bore in mind that if there are to be any additions made to the kingdom of Christ, these additions are chiefly to be made from among those careless, worldly, antagonistic persons who do not at present respond to any Christian sentiments. But besides the mingling which nature, and what may be called accident, afford, there are connections we form of our own choice, and companies we enter which we might, if we chose, avoid. There is a borderland of amusements, occupations, duties, common to the godly, and the ungodly, and for the regulation of our conduct, in respect to such intercourse, this parable suffices. Can the occupation be leavened, and can it be leavened by us? Can it be engaged in in a right spirit, and are we sure enough of our own stability to engage in it with benefit? A man of strong physique may scathlessly enter a room out of which a weaker constitution would inevitably carry infection. And it is foolish to argue that because some other person is none the worse of going to this or that company, or engaging in this or that pursuit, therefore you would not be the worse of it. You would not so argue if your entrance into an infected house was in question.

But there is also a culpable refusal to mix, as well as an inconsiderate eagerness to do so. Most of us shrink from the responsibility of materially influencing the life of another person. Ask a

man for advice about any important matter, and you know what devices he will fall upon to avoid advising you. Many of us are really afraid of incurring the hazardous responsibility of making a man a Christian. Two opposite feelings dispose us to shrink from mingling with all kinds of people. One is a feeling of hopelessness about others. They seem so remote from the acknowledgment of Christ's rule, that we feel as if they could never be leavened. The parable reminds us, that while no doubt it is impossible to leaven sand, so long as the meal remains meal it may be leavened. The other feeling is one rather of despair about ourselves than about others. We feel as if our influence could only do harm. We are afraid to live out our inward life freely and strongly lest it injure others. This feeling, however, should prompt us neither to seclude ourselves from society, nor to behave in a constrained and artificial manner in society, but to renew our own connection with the leaven till we feel sure our whole nature is throughout renewed. If any one is exercising a healthy influence while we are languid and incapable, it is simply because that other person is in connection with Christ. That connection is open to us as well.

The mixing being thus accomplished, how is the process continued? Besides mingling with society and joining freely in all the innocent ways of the world, what is a Christian to do in order

that his Christian feeling may be communicated to others? The answer is, He is to be a Christian; not to be anxious to show himself a Christian, but to be careful to be one. It has been wisely said that "the true philosophy or method of doing good is, first of all and principally, to be good—to have a character that will of itself communicate good." This is the very teaching of the parable, which says, "Be a Christian, and you must make Christians, or help to make them. Be leaven, and you will leaven." The leaven does not need to say, I am leaven; nor to say that which lies next it, Be thou leavened. By the inevitable communication of the properties of the leaven to that which lies beside it, and by this again infecting what is beyond, the whole, gradually and unseen, but naturally and certainly, is leavened.

This illustration of the leaven must, of course, not be too hard pressed, as if the parable meant that only by the unconscious influence of character and not at all by the conscious and voluntary influence of speech and action, the kingdom of Christ is to be extended. Yet no one can fail to observe that the illustration of the parable is more appropriate to the unconscious than to the intended influence which Christians exercise on those around them. It is rather the all-pervading and subtle extension of Christian principles than their declared and aggressive advocacy that

is brought before the mind by the figure of leaven. It reminds us that men are most susceptible to the influence that flows from character. This influence sheds itself off in a thousand ways too subtle to be resisted, and in forms so fine as to insinuate themselves where words would find no entrance. A man is in many circumstances more likely to do good by acting in a Christian manner, than by drawing attention to the faults of others and exposing their iniquity. The less ostentatious, the less conscious the influence exercised upon us is, the more likely are we to admit it. And when we are compelled to reprove, or to advise, or to entreat, this also must be in simplicity and as the natural expression, not the formal and forced exhibition of Christian feeling. The words uttered by a shallow-hearted and self-righteous Pharisee may by God's grace turn a sinner from the error of his ways; the lump of ice, itself chill and hard, may be used as a lens to kindle and thaw other objects; but notwithstanding this, he who does not speak with his whole character backing what he says, may expect to fail. It is man that influences man; not the words or individual actions of a man, but the complete character which his whole life silently reveals.

If then you sometimes reproach yourself for not exercising any perceptible influence for good over some friend or child, if it disturbs you that

you have done less than you might have done by conversation or direct appeal, it may indeed be quite true that you have thus fallen short of your duty; yet remember that conduct often tells far more than talk, and that your conduct has certainly told upon the secret thoughts of your friend, whereas were you to speak merely for the sake of exonerating your conscience, the chances are, you would speak in an awkward, artificial, and ineffective manner. That conversation is often the most religious which in appearance is most secular; which concerns bills, and cargoes, and investments, and contracts, and family arrangements, and literature; and which, without any allusion to God, the soul, and eternity, secretly impregnates the whole of human life with the Spirit of Christ. If that only is to be reckoned religious conversation in which the topics of religion are discussed, then religious conversation has commonly produced more heat and bitterness and antagonism to Christ's Spirit than any other.

While, then, direct address forms one great part of the means of leavening those around you, it is to be borne in mind, that in the first place you must *be* what you wish others to become. If not, then certainly nothing that you can say is at all likely to compensate for the evil you may do by your character. It does not need that you intend evil to any; it *will be out* whether

you mean it or no. If you are yourself evil, then most certainly you are making others evil. Can you number the times that you have checked the utterance of Christian feeling in those who knew they would find no response in you? Can you tell how many have been confirmed in a sinful course by your winking at their faults, and have none been led into sin by your removing the scruples of their innocence? Are you sure that your example has never turned the balance the wrong way at some critical hour of your neighbor's life? Is there no one who can stand forward and charge you with having left him in darkness about his duty, when you might have enlightened him? with having made him easy in sin by your pleasant, affable, unreproving demeanor towards him? Are there none who to all eternity will bear the punishment of sins in which you were aiding and abetting; none whom you have directly encouraged to evil, who would, but for you, have been clear of evil thoughts, desires, and deeds of which they now are guilty; none in whose punishment you might see the punishment of sins which were as much yours as theirs, and the memory of which might seem sufficient, if that were possible, to poison the very joys of heaven?

Do not turn the warning of this parable aside by the thought, Am I my brother's keeper? Most assuredly you are responsible for your own character, and for all its effects. If you are not doing



good to others, it is because there is something wrong in yourself. If you are not leavening others, it is because you are yourself unleavened: for there is no such thing as leaven that does not impart its qualities to that which is about it. Can you confine the perfume to the flower, or restrict the light of the sun to its own globe? Just as little can you restrain all Christian qualities within your own person: something material, something essential to Christian character is lacking if it be not influencing those about it.

It is a glorious consummation that this parable speaks of. It tells of a mixing that is to go on till "*the whole*" is leavened. The Spirit of Christ is to pervade all things. That Spirit is to take possession of all national characteristics and all individual gifts. Every variety of quality, of human faculty, temperament, and endowment, is to be Christianized, that all may serve Christ. In His kingdom is to be gathered all that has ever served or gladdened humanity: the freshness of childhood and its simplicity, the sagacity, gravity, and self-command of age, the enterprise and capacity of manhood, the qualities that suffering matures, and those that are nurtured by prosperity; all occupations that have invited and stimulated and rewarded the energies of men, all modes of human life, and all affections that conscience approves, all that is the true work, joy, and glory, of our nature is to be pervaded with the

sanctifying, purifying, elevating leaven of Christ's Spirit. And this is to be achieved not otherwise than by personal influence. Is it possible that you should have no desire to help in this? that you should be in the world of men and not care to see it accomplishing this destiny? that you should know the earnestness of Christ in this behalf, and never lift a finger or open your lips to aid Him? Surely it will pain you to come to the end of life and have it to reflect that not one soul has been effectually helped by you. Would you not save many if by a wish you could lift them to the gate of heaven? Is it, then, because of the little labor and sacrifice that are needed for this purpose that you hold back from helping? Is there nothing you can do, is there nothing you ought to do in the way of leavening some little bit of the great mass? Come back yourselves to the leaven, cultivate diligently that fellowship with Christ Himself, which is alone sufficient to equip you for this great calling. Make sure of the reality of your own acceptance of His Spirit, and then whatever you do, utter, touch, will all be leavened.

## THE HID TREASURE AND THE PEARL OF PRICE.

MATT. xiii. 44-46.

THESE two parables have one and the same object. They are meant to exhibit the incomparable value of the kingdom of heaven. They exhibit this value not by attempting to describe the kingdom or its various advantages, but by depicting the eagerness with which he who finds it and recognizes its value, parts with all to make it his own. This eagerness is not dependent on the previous expectations or views or condition of the finder of the kingdom, but is alike displayed whether the finder is lifted by his discovery out of acknowledged poverty, or has his hands already filled with goodly pearls; whether he has no outlook and hope at all, or is eagerly seeking for perfect happiness. The one parable illustrates the eagerness of a poor man who lights upon the treasure apparently by accident; the other illustrates the eagerness of a rich man whose finding of the pearl of price is the result of carefully studied and long sustained search.

This difference in the two parables sets clearly before the mind a distinction which is frequently

apparent among those who become Christians. Men naturally view life very differently, and take up from the first very various attitudes towards the world into which we all have come. One person is from the first quite at home in it, another slinks through it as if there were nothing friendly or congenial to him here. One man seems to regard it as a banqueting house which is to be made the most of ere the sun rise and dispel his illusion, while another uses it as a battle-field where conquests are to be made, and where all is to be done in grim earnest and strenuously with no thought of pleasure. And as these parables indicate, there are men born with placid and contented natures, others with eager, soaring, insatiable spirits; some, in a word, are born merchants, others day-laborers. Some, that is, are born with a noble instinct which never forsakes them, but prompts them to believe that there is infinite joy and satisfaction to be found, and that it shall be theirs: they cannot rest with small things, but are driven always forward to more and higher. Others, again, never look beyond their present attainment, cannot understand the restless ambition that weeps for more worlds, have no speculation in them, no broad plan of life, nor much idea that any purpose is to be served by it. They have the peaceful, happy industry which makes the day's labor easy, but not the enterprise which can plan a life's work.

and make every available material on earth subserve its plan.

This difference, when exhibited in connection with religion, becomes very marked. Looking upon some men, you would say you don't know how ever they are to be brought to Christ, they are so thoroughly at home and at rest in their daily business, and this seems to afford them so much interest, satisfaction, and reward that you cannot fancy them so much as once reflecting whether something more is not needed. They seem so peculiarly fitted for this world, you can fancy them going on in the same sphere forever. Of others, again, you are perpetually wondering how they have not long ago found what they have been so long seeking; you know that, employ themselves as they will in this world, their inward thought is writing vanity on all this world gives them—they crave a spiritual treasure.

In the first of these two parables, then, we see how the kingdom of heaven is sometimes found by those who are not seeking it. The point of this part of the parable and its distinction from the other seems to lie in this, that while the man was giving a deeper furrow to his field, intent only on his team, his plowshare suddenly grated on the slab that concealed or rung upon the chest that contained the treasure, or turned up a glittering coin that had fallen out in the hasty burial of the store. Or he may have been

sauntering through a neighbor's field, when his eye is suddenly attracted by some sign which makes his heart leap to his mouth and fixes him for the moment to the spot, because he knows that treasure must be there. He went out in the morning thinking of nothing less than that before nightfall his fortune would be made—suddenly, without effort or expectation of his, he sees untold wealth within his grasp. He knows nothing of the history of the treasure—does not know on whose feet these bright anklets gleamed in the dance, knows none of the touching memories that are associated with that signet ring, nothing of the long hard strife by which these gold-pieces were acquired, nor of the disaster which tore them from the reluctant hand of the possessor. It is not *his* blood that has dyed the gold on that jewel-hilted scimitar. He can imagine the care-worn man when trouble and war overran the land, stealing out in the darkness and making his treasure secure, and marking it by signs which, alas! he was never again to note; but he *knows* nothing of him, knew nothing of him. Ages before, this treasure had been hid; for him it had been prepared without any intention or labor of his, and now suddenly he lights upon it; out of poverty he to his own astonishment steps into wealth, and his whole life is changed for him without hope or effort of his own.

So, says our Lord, is the kingdom of heaven.

Suddenly, in the midst of other thoughts a man is brought face to face with Christ, and while earning his daily bread and seeking for no more than success in life can give him, unexpectedly finds that eternal things are his. Christ is found of them that sought Him not. Is it not often so? The man has begun life not thinking that any very great thing can be made of it, as little as the plowman expects to be lord of the manor, and to own the horses, lands, and comforts of the proprietor. He begins with the idea that if he is careful, diligent, and favored by circumstances, life may be pleasant. He has a prospect of a decent, comfortable livelihood, or, at the best, of a good-going business, with margin of leisure for friendly intercourse, the reading of pleasant literature, and so on. He is confident he will marry happily, and live and see good days. In other words, he has extremely modest expectations of what life can do for him ; has no soaring anticipations of "the ampler aether, the deviner air," does not recognize his own capacity nor the size he may grow to, but, like the child for whom the world can do no more if he is promised some favorite toy, fancies that no better thing can come to him than houses, lands, wife and children, friendships and prosperity. Or if he once had visitings of a higher, ampler hope, and seemed to see that round and beyond the successes of business and the common pleasures of

life there lay a limitless ocean of feeling and of thought,—worlds upon worlds, like the starry unfathomable firmament, in which the soul might find expanse and joy forever,—these visions have been wiped out by the coarse hand of some early sin, or have been worn from the surface of the mind by the hard traffic of the world; and now what the shriveled creature seeks is possibly but the accomplishment of a daily routine, possibly the attainment of some poor ambition, or the wreaking of a low revenge, or triumph over a rival who has defeated him, or possibly not even anything so definite as that. He *had* a vision of a life which might fulfil high aims, which might be ennobled and glorified throughout by true and pervading fellowship with God, he once was confident that what the human imagination could conceive of good, that, and far more than that, was possible to the human nature, and to every man who had it; but that bright vision has passed as the morning, all aglow with light and freshness, is quenched in rain and cloud and gloomy wretchedness.

This, then, is in point of fact the condition of many a man as he passes through life—he has no conception of the blessedness that awaits him, he has as little hope of any supreme and complete felicity as the man of the parable had any expectation of lighting upon a hid treasure. We only think of what *we* can make of life, not of the



wealth God has laid in our path. But suddenly our steps are arrested ; circumstances that seem purely accidental break down the partition that has hemmed us in to time, and we see that eternity is ours. We thought we had a house, 100 acres of land, £1000 well invested, and we find we have God. We were comforting ourselves with the prospect of increased salary, of ampler comforts and advantages, and a voice comes ringing through our soul, "*all things* are yours, for ye are Christ's and Christ is God's." *How* it is that the eyes are now opened to this treasure, we can as little tell as the plowman who has driven his slow steers over that same field since first he could guide the plow but has never till this day seen the treasure. A few words casually dropped, a sentence read in an idle moment, some break in our prosperous course, some pause which allows the mind to wander in unaccustomed directions,—one cannot say what is insufficient to bring the wandering and empty soul to a settled possession of the kingdom of heaven, for the treasure seems to be his before he looks for it, before he feels his need of it, before has taken thought or steps about it. This morning he was content with what a man can have outside of God's kingdom : this evening everything outside that kingdom has lost its value and is as nothing. The man who is lost in mist on a wild hill thinks himself exceptionally

well off if he can find a sheepfold to give him shelter, and is thankful if he can see two steps before him and can avoid the precipice; but suddenly the sun shines out, the mist lifts, and he sees before him a boundless prospect, bright placid dwellings of men, and his path leading down to the shining valley with all its stir of life, and now what comforted and sufficed him before is all forgotten.

You will not fail in passing to draw the inference from this presentation of the manner of finding the kingdom, that conversions which have taken place quite unexpectedly and with great ease on the part of the converted person, need not therefore be insufficient and hollow. We are very apt to think that because the kingdom of heaven is so great a treasure a man should spend much labor in attaining it—that as the acceptance of Christ is the most important attainment a man can make, there ought to be some proportionate effort and expectancy on his part—that so great a treasure is not to be made over to one who is not caring for it or thinking of it. But this parable shows us that there may be a finding without any previous seeking, and that the essential thing is, not whether a man has been seeking, and how long, and how earnestly—no, but whether a man has found. The man in the parable would not have found more in that spot had he been seeking more and seeking

it elsewhere all his days; the buried money was not accumulating interest while he was spending years in the search. The very same treasure may be found by the man who has grown gray in the quest of treasure, and by the child who plays in the field; by the alchemist who has spent his life in examining the boasted tests for finding treasure, and by the laboring man who has never heard of such tests and does not dream of finding sudden wealth. The question is, Does a man know the value of what has turned up before him, and is he so in earnest as to sell all for it? Let us not hesitate to believe that in one hour some heedless person has found what we have all our life been seeking, if only he shows his appreciation of the treasure by parting with all for it.

The second parable introduces us to the other, the higher type of man, the merchantman—the man who has *not* moderate expectations, who refuses ever to be satisfied until he has all, who is always meditating new ventures, and to whom his present possessions are only of value as the means of acquiring what is yet beyond his reach. He sets out with the inborn conviction or instinct that there *is* something worth seeking, worth the labor and the search of a life, something which will abundantly repay us, and to which we can wholly, freely, and eternally give ourselves up, and on which we shall delight to

spend our whole strength, capabilities, and life. He refuses to be satisfied with the moderate, often interrupted and often quenched joys of this life. He considers physical health, the respect of his fellow-men, a good education, good social position, and so forth, as all goodly pearls, but he is not going to sit down satisfied with these things if there is anything better to be had. He refuses to have anything short of the best. He goes on from one acquirement to another. Money is good, he at first thinks, but knowledge is better. He parts with the one to get the other. Friendship is good, but love is better, and he cannot satisfy himself with the one, but must also have the other. The respect of his fellows is good, but self-respect and a pure conscience are better. Human love is a goodly pearl, but this only quickens him to crave insatiably for the love of God. He must always have what is beyond and best. He refuses to believe that God has created us to be partially satisfied, happy at intervals, content with effort, *believing* ourselves blessed, disguising the reality of our condition by the aid of fancy, or fleeing from it on the wings of hope, but to be partakers of His own blessedness, and to enjoy eternally the sufficiency of Him in whom are all things.

This spirit of expectation is encouraged by the parable. It seems to say to us, Covet earnestly the best gifts. Never make up your mind

merely to endure or merely to be resigned. Test what you have, and if it do not satisfy you wholly, seek for something better. It is not for you who have a God, a God of infinite resource and of infinite love, to accustom yourselves to merely negative blessings and doubtful, limited conditions. You are to start with the belief that you are not made for final disappointment, nor to rest content with something less than you once hoped for or can now conceive, but that there is somewhere, and attainable by you, the most unchallengeable felicity—that there does exist a perfect condition, a pearl of great price, and that there is but a question of the way to it, a question of search. You are to start with this belief, and you are to hold to it to the end. Under no compulsion or enticement, in the face of no disappointment, give up this persuasion that goodly pearls are to be had, and to be had by you, that into your life and soul the full sense of ample possession is one day to enter. When you come up from a breathless eager search like the pearl-diver, spent and bleeding, and with your hands filled only with mud or worthless shells; or when, like the merchant, you have ventured your all, and are reduced to beggary and thrown back to the very beginning, the great hope of your life being taken from you; when all your days seem to have been wasted in fruitless search; when every feeling within you rises up in mutiny against you, and

like an ignorant crew scorns your adventure, and would put about and run with the wind back from the new world you seek, put them down ; you have certainty on your side, simple, sheer certainty, for " he that seeketh, *findeth*."

The important point in these parables is that which is common to both. The teaching which our Lord desires to convey by their means regards the incomparable value of the kingdom of heaven, and the readiness with which one who perceives its value will give up all for it. He wishes us to consider the alacrity, gladness, and assurance with which one who apprehends the value of the kingdom will and should put aside everything which prevents him from making it his own. It is the usual, universal, mercantile feeling. The merchant does not part with his other possessions reluctantly when he wishes to obtain some better possession ; he longs to get rid of them ; he goes into the investment about which he has satisfied himself with thorough good will ; he clears out as fast as he can from every other investment, and endeavors to realize wherever he can that he may have his means free for this better and more productive venture. People who do not know its value may think the man mad selling out at low prices, at unsuitable times, at a loss ; but he knows what he is doing. I don't care what I lose, he says to himself, for if I can only get that field I shall have infinite compensation for my losses.

As soon as he has made up his mind that there is a treasure in the field, he is filled with tremulous, sleepless eagerness, till he makes it his own. Day and night his heart is there and his thoughts. His dreams are full of visions of possession, or of heart-breaking failure. His waking hours are nervously agitated by fears and schemings. He always finds that his road home lies past the longed-for property. He is jealous of the very birds that hover over it. The world is full of stories, and every day adds to the stock of stories that display the ingenuity, craft, perseverance, consuming zeal, spent in winning the bit of ground that is coveted. No labor is grudged, no sacrifice is shrunk from, no present poverty is a trial if it brings the coveted property nearer.

But is this a similitude for the kingdom of heaven? Is it not rather a picture of what ought to be than of what is? What we commonly find is that the kingdom of heaven is not so esteemed. We see men hesitating to part with anything for it, looking at it as a sad alternative, as a resort to which they must perhaps betake themselves when too old to enjoy life any longer, as what they may have to come to when all the real joy and intensity of life are gone, but not as that on which life itself can best be spent. Entrance into the kingdom of heaven is looked upon much as entrance into the fortified town is viewed by the rural population. It may be necessary in time of danger, but they

will think with longing of the fields and homesteads they must abandon ; it is by constraint, not from love, that they make the change. In short, it is plain that men generally do not reckon the kingdom of heaven to be of such value that they sacrifice everything else for its sake. And it is of supreme importance that we should clearly see the grounds on which we base our confidence that we ourselves are exceptions to the general rule, if we have such a confidence. Have we really shown any of that mercantile eagerness which the parable speaks of? Have we in any way shown that the kingdom of heaven is first in our thoughts? What meaning has this "selling of all" in our life?

For it is to be observed that there always is this selling wherever the kingdom is won. We have it not at all unless we have given all for it. It is like a choice between living in the town or in the country. We know we cannot do both, and in order to secure the advantages of the one kind of life we must give up those of the other. So, living for ourselves prevents us from living for God, and we cannot do the one without wholly giving up the other. If you value the kingdom of God more than all else, you will eagerly give up everything that prevents your winning it ; but no mere pretended esteem for it will prompt you to make the needful sacrifices, or will actually give you possession. If you do not



really desire the kingdom more than aught else, then you have not found it. A feigned desire does not move us to obtain anything. It is what you really love that you spend thought and effort and money upon, not what you know you ought to love, and are trying to persuade yourself to love.

In conclusion, this parable lets fall these two words of warning—1. Make your calculations, and act accordingly. If you think the world will pay you better than Christ, then serve it; give yourself heartily and without compunction to it. Do not be so weak as to allow thoughts of things eternal and a spiritual world you have forsaken to haunt you and spoil your enjoyment. Make your choice and act upon it. If there is no better pearl, no richer treasure than what you can win by devotion to business and living for yourself, then by all means choose that, and make the most of it. But if you think that Christ was right, if you foresee that what is outside His kingdom must perish, and that He has gathered within it all that is worthy, all that is enduring, all that is as it ought to be, if you know that you are not and can never be blessed outside that kingdom, then let the reasonableness and remonstrance of this parable move you to show some eagerness in winning that great treasure. Make your choice and act upon it. Let your mind dwell on the objects Christ has in view till you become enamored of them, and till they alone draw you and command your

effort. Strive to shake off the pitiful avarice, the timorous anxieties, the cowardly self-seeking, the low, earthly, stupid aims of the man who serves the world, and let the Spirit of Christ draw you into fellowship with His aims, and give you a place in His kingdom.

2. If you have this treasure, do not murmur at the price you have paid for it. If you have to forego earthly advancement, if you are inwardly constrained to part with money which might have brought many comforts, if you have been drawn to do things which are misconstrued and which make you feel awkward with your friends, if self asserts itself again and again, and claims pleasure and gain and gratification of various kinds, do not murmur at what the kingdom is costing you, but rather count over your treasure, and see how much more you have than you have lost. Having what worlds cannot buy, you will surely not vex yourself by longing for this or that which the poorest-slave of this world can easily obtain. Suppose you had the offer to barter your interest in the kingdom for any or all of the possessions, advantages, and pleasures you are deprived of, you would not do it; if, then, in your own judgment, and by your own deliberate choice you have the better portion, it is scarcely fair to bewail yourself as an ill-used person. Anything you have been required to give up for the kingdom's sake was either of no real value—it was the coin which,

so long as you kept it, could neither warm nor clothe you, and whose only use was to buy valuables ; or if of real value, the relinquishment of it has given you what is of infinite value.

## THE NET.

MATT. xii. 47-50.

IN the foregoing parables of the kingdom Jesus has pointed out the causes of its success and failure, its mixed appearance in this world, its surprising growth from small beginnings, and the method of its extension. He now points to the result of all, when the great net shall be drawn to shore, all the influences and efforts of this life ended and brought to a pause; when there shall be "no more sea," no fluctuation, no ebb and flow, no tide of good resolve and progress sucked back from all it had reached, and leaving a foul and slimy beach; especially no mingling of bad and good in an obscure and confusing element; but decision and separation, a deliberate sitting down to see what has been made of this world by us all, and a summing up on that eternal shore of all gains and results, and every man's aim made manifest by his end.

There is obviously considerable resemblance between this parable of the net and the parable of the tares. But the one is not a mere repetition of the other under a different figure. Every parable is intended to illustrate one truth. Light may

incidentally be shed on other points, as you cannot turn your eye or the light you carry on the object you wish to examine without seeing and shedding light on other things as well. Now the one truth which is especially enforced in the parable of the tares is that it is dangerous in the extreme to attempt in this present time to separate the evil from the good in the Church: whereas the one truth to which the parable of the net gives prominence is that this separation will be effected by and by in its own suitable time. No doubt this future separation appears in the parable of the tares also, but in that parable it is introduced for the sake of lending emphasis to the warning against attempting a separation now; in this parable of the net it is introduced with no such purpose. A weeding process might very naturally suggest itself, indeed always does suggest itself, to one looking over a hedge at a dirty field; but no one watching the drawing of a net would dream of plunging in to throw out worthless fish. Let the net be drawn; then, as a matter of course, the separation will be made. The value of the take, which cannot yet be estimated, will be ascertained by and by. The whole results of the work of Christ in the world will then but not sooner be known.

Another point of distinction between the two parables is this, that while in the one parable the springing of tares among the good corn is ascribed

to the design of an enemy, in the other the mixture of good and bad in the net is rather exhibited as necessarily resulting from the nature of the case. In hunting, a man can make his choice and pick out the finest of the herd, letting the rest go ; but in fishing with a net no such selection is possible ; all must be drawn to shore that happens to have been embraced within the sweep of the net. So in sending out His servants to invite men to the kingdom, our Lord did not name individuals to whom they were to go, and who should, from first to last, prove themselves obedient to the word ; He did not even name classes of persons or races with whom they would be sure to find success, but He told them to go into all the world and invite all men without distinction. The preachers of the kingdom have no powers to make selections for God ; and to say of one that he will be, and of another that he will never be valuable to God. They are to cast the net so as to embrace all, and leave the determination of what is bad and what is good to the end.

Before endeavoring to extract from the parable its direct teaching, one cannot fail to notice some more general ideas suggested by the figure used. We are, for example, reminded that we are all advancing through life towards its final issue. Our condition in this respect bears a close resemblance to fish enclosed in a net. You have seen men dragging a river, fixing one end of the net,

taking the other across the whole stream, and then fetching a wide compass, and enclosing in their net everything dead or alive, bad or good, from surface to bottom. Or you have seen the same thing done in the sea, one net enclosing quite a lake within itself, and gradually as it closes round the fish, and they find that it is sunk to the sand and floated to the crest of the wave, you have pitied their wild efforts to escape, and seen how sure a barrier these imperceptible meshes are. At first, while the net is wide, they frisk and leap and seem free, but soon they discover that their advance is but in one direction, and when they halt they feel the pressure of the net. So is it with ourselves—we *must* go on, we cannot break through into the past, we cannot ever again be at the same distance from the shore as we were last year, yesterday, now. Yesterday, however delightful, you cannot live twice; eternity, however distasteful, you are certainly going on to. This day you have less space and scope than ever you had before, and every hour you spend, every action you do, every pleasure you enjoy makes this little space less. You cannot make time stand still till you shall resolve how to spend it. You cannot bring your life to a pause while you make experiments as to the best mode of living. The years you spend ill, you cannot receive again to spend well, the years spent in indecision, in doubt, in selfish seclusion *are* spent, and cannot now be

filled with service of God and profit to your fellows. Your lifetime you have but once, and each hour of it but once ; and as remorselessly as the last night of the convicted criminal is beat out and brings round the morning that is to look upon his death, so are your lives running steadily out, never faster when you long for to-morrow, never slower when you fear it, but ever with the same measured and certain advance. Do what you will, make what plans you will, settle yourself as fixedly in this life as you will, you are passing through and out of it, and shall one day look on it as all past—forever past. By no will of our own have we come into this life, but here we find ourselves and the net fallen behind us, so that we must accept all the responsibilities of human life, and go on to meet all its consequences.

Besides enclosure and inevitable passing on to a termination, the net suggests the idea of entanglement. Looking at fish in a net you see many that are not swimming freely, but are caught in the meshes and dragged on. The experience of some persons interprets this to them. While all of us are drawing on together towards eternity there are some who feel daily the pressure of the net. They have got into circumstances which they would fain be out of but cannot. Their position is not altogether of their own choosing, and they discharge its duties because they must, not because they would. At some



former period they were too careless, or shortsighted, or irresolute; they exercised too little their right to determine their own course, and they now suffer the bondage consequent on this neglect.

If the conduct required of you by the position or connection into which you have come be disapproved by your conscience, then you must somehow break through and escape, else your soul will suffer detriment, and that in you which was good when first you were entangled will be landed broken, bruised, and useless. But if the conduct required be only disagreeable and humiliating and not sinful, you may have to adjust yourself to your circumstances. Do not toss and struggle in the net, but quietly set yourself to make the most of the condition you have unfortunately brought yourself into. It may now be your duty to continue in a position it was not your duty originally to enter. A wrong choice may have brought you to a right thing. Do not, therefore, allow any feeling of the awkwardness, restrictions, unsuitableness, or painfulness of your position, nor any reflections on the folly that brought you into it, to fret you into uselessness. Just because it seems in so many ways unsuitable, it may call out deeper qualities in you, a patience which otherwise might have been undeveloped, a knowledge of God and man, a meekness and strength, which enlarge and mature your spirit.

Under very strange influences and forces are

we passing onwards ; by hopes and ambitions, by sickness and watching, by anguish and mirth, by the forlorn remembrance of a happy past and the sad forecasting of the future, by occupations that hurry us on from day to day, and by longings that abide with us through life and are never satisfied. And often we would fain escape from the gentle compulsion by which God draws us to our end, and have to remind ourselves that however entangled and tied up we are, and however prevented from our own ways and directions, this present time is after all but the drawing of the net and not the time of our use ; that though now debarred from many pursuits we think we might be useful in, and hurried past enjoyments that delight us, we are passing to a shore where there is room and time enough for the fulfilment of every human purpose and the exercise of every human faculty ; that after all our sins and follies, after all our pains and anxieties and difficulties, there does most surely come the kingdom of heaven and its glorious liberty. Here we quickly wax old, our freedom of choice and liberty of action are quickly taken from us, we stretch forth our hands and another girds us and carries us whither we would not ; but there our youth shall be renewed with all its freedom from care, its spring and energy, its fresh views of truth, its boldness to live and see good days, its purpose for the life that lies before it unsullied ; and it shall be again

as when "thou wast young and girdedst thyself and walkedst whither thou wouldest."

But these are not the points emphasized in the parable. The parable sets the present mixture of good and bad in the kingdom of heaven or in the Church over against the eventual separation.

1. First then, we have the truth that the net gathers "of every kind." This is the first thing that strikes one looking at a net drawn ashore—the confused mass of dead and living rubbish and prize. Shells, mud, starfish, salt-smelling weed, useless refuse of all kinds, are mingled with the fresh and wholesome fish that lie gasping and floundering in the net. Of the bad there is every kind of thing that can spoil the net and injure its contents; and of the good there is every kind, small and great, coarse and fine. And until the net is fairly landed it is impossible to say whether the weight is to be rejoiced in or not. This is set before us as a picture of the Church of Christ as it now is. It embraces every variety of character. At one time we are tempted to think that the mass of professing Christians is but so much dead weight; at other times we measure the success of the gospel by the mere numbers brought within the Church. The truth is, we cannot yet say much about the success of the gospel. Occasionally indeed there may be a gleam through the water that gives assurance of a large and fine fish: there may be deeds done which draw the eye

of every one, and unmistakably prove that in the Church there are men after God's own heart. We feel that of some men the character and quality are already ascertained, and that it needs no day of separation to tell us their worth. But there remains a vast mass about which we can say little ; nay, we know that in the Church there are foul, lumpish, poisonous creatures. This is what our Lord anticipated, that while His Church would attract men whom God would gather to Him with delight as being of His own spirit, there would also be drawn to it a number of wretched creatures who would go through life trying to hide from themselves that they love the world much more than God, and who must in the end be thrown aside as fit for no good purpose, as so much useless rubbish.

This mixture arises from the manner in which the kingdom of heaven is proclaimed among men. It is not proclaimed by addressing private messages to selected and approved individuals, but publicly to all. And it is so proclaimed because it is for men generally and not for any special kind or class, and because God "would have all men to be saved." The recruiting sergeant watches for likely men and singles them out from the crowd ; but the kingdom of heaven opens its gates to all, because it has that which appeals to humanity at large, and can make use of every kind of man who honestly attaches him-

self to it. Our freedom of choice is left absolutely uncontrolled so far as the outward offer of the gospel goes ; it is not even biassed by any knowledge on our part that we are considered specially suitable for the work God has to do. Christ's kingdom gathers in not only those in whom there is a natural leaning towards a devout life, or those who are of a susceptible temperament, or those who are attracted by a life of self-sacrifice, but it gathers in "of every kind." You really cannot say who among your friends is most likely to become a Christian, because men become Christians not from any apparent predisposition, not because religion suits their idiosyncrasy, their individual mood and special tastes, but because the kingdom of heaven satisfies human wants which are as common to the race as hunger and thirst. But the kingdom being thus open to all, many enter it for the sake of some of its advantages, while they remain at heart disloyal, and are never carried out of themselves by a sense of its glory, and are alien to that great movement for the lasting good of men which the kingdom truly is. They have an external present attachment to the kingdom, but they do not belong to it and are not in it heart and soul.

But this mixture is at length to give place. In the net, while we are in this world, all distinctions seem to be made light of ; in the end, on the shore, a final and real distinction is to be

exhibited and acted on. All are to pass through the hands of skilled judgment. The angels sever the wicked from among the just, so that the just alone are left in the net. The purpose of the net, of the draught, of the whole ongoing of this world is at length seen to have been for the sake of the just. Much bulkier, weightier, noisier, brighter colored, more curious things are drawn up, but these are cast aside summarily—it was not to secure these the net was drawn. The fishermen were not mere naturalists dragging for what is curious and rare; not mere idlers fishing for sport and caring little for the *use* of the result; not mere children amazed and delighted with every strange or huge thing they land; but they have cast the net for a purpose, and whatever is not suitable for this purpose is refuse and rubbish to them. The huge creature that has been a terror to the deep, the lovely sea plant that has waved its fruitless head in the garden of the sea—these are not twice looked at by the fishermen. They are acting on an understanding that the net was drawn for a purpose.

And so it shall be in the end of the world. The *end* is not a mere running down of the machinery that keeps the world going, it is not a mere exhaustion of the life that keeps us all alive, it is not a hap-hazard cutting of the thread, it is a conclusion, coming as truly in its own fit day and order, as much in the fulness of time and

because things are ripe for it, as the birth of Christ came. It is the time of the gathering up of all things to completion, when the few last finishing strokes are given to the work, that suddenly show the connection of things which seemed widely separate, and reveal at once the purpose and meaning of the whole. Men will then understand, what now scarcely one can constantly believe, that it is God's purpose that is silently being accomplished, and that it is usefulness to Him that is the final standard of value.

The distinction which finally separates men into two classes must be real and profound. It is here said to be *our value to God*. Are we useless to Him, or can He make us serve any good purpose? Have we become so wholly demoralized by a selfish, limited life, that we cannot cherish any cordial desire for the common good, or enter into sympathy with purposes that do not promise profit or pleasure to ourselves? You have some idea what the purposes of God are; you see these purposes in the life and death of Christ; you know that in God's purposes that which contributes to the elevation of character takes precedence of what merely secures outward comfort or present advantage; you recognize that His Spirit delights in deeds of mercy, of self-sacrifice, of holy service—have you, then, such qualities as would be helpful in carrying out such purposes? are you already influential in society for good, helpful in

extirpating vice and crime, and in alleviating the wretchedness of disease and poverty? do your sympathies and your thoughts run much towards such an expenditure of your energies? have you the first requisite of His servants, such a participation in His love for men, and such a zeal for the advancement of the race as wither within you all isolating and debasing selfishness?

The fish taken in the net are disposed of by the fishermen, and are in their hands without choice or motion. A minute before they were swimming hither and thither, moving themselves by their own energies; now they are dealt with according to a judgment not their own. The situation is not more novel to the fishes than it will be to us. Here in this world we are conscious of a power to choose our own destiny, to change our character, and become different from what we are. We are not yet all we ought to be, but we can discard evil habits, repress base motives, and become at length suitable for God's work, harmonious with Him through all our being. So we flatter ourselves. But there comes a time, when, whatever we are, that we shall forever be; when we shall be, as it were, passive in the grip of destiny, disposed of by it, and unable to resist or alter it; when we shall find that the time for choosing is past, and that we must accept and abide by the consequences of our past choices; when for us the irrevocable word shall



have gone forth, "He that is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is holy, let him be holy still."

Amidst the sudden revolutions of thought and revulsion of feeling, amidst the utter discomfiture of many a hope on that day when the net is drawn and we are all suddenly thrown out on the eternal shore, will your hope not fail you? As you anticipate the hand that is to separate the good from the bad, do you rejoice that a penetrating eye and an unerring wisdom will guide it? do you rejoice that it is God who is coming to judge the world in righteousness, and that no mistake can be made, no superficial distinction hide the real one?

It is possible some one may defend himself against the parable by saying, "I will not alarm myself by judging of my destiny by my own qualities; I am trusting to Christ." But precisely in so far as you are trusting to Christ, you have those qualities which the final judgment will require you to show. "If any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." You are useful to God in so far as you have the Spirit of Christ. Plainly the criterion given by the parable is the only sufficient criterion by which men can be judged as they issue from this life. Are they in such sympathy with God as to be capable of entering into His work and ways in the future, or have they only cultivated habits and qualities

which served them for a life that is now past? Only by what we are, can we be finally judged; not by what we believe, but by what our belief has made us; not by what we profess, not by what we know, but by the results in character of what we have professed and known. In the final judgment, we shall not be required to assert that we are converted persons, or that we are trusting in Christ; we shall not be required to assert anything; but our future shall be determined by our actual fitness for it. Fitness for carrying on God's work in the future, fitness for helping forward the cause of humanity in the future, fitness for living in and finding our joy in the future which Christ's Spirit is to rule, we must have if we are to enter that future. Get the fitness how you may, it is this you must have. If you can get it by some other means than by adherence to Christ and the reception of His Spirit, use that means, but this fitness you must have.

And I think any one who seriously accepts this as the real outlook for us men will feel that he cannot do better than go to school to Christ that he may acquire not only a perception of what this fitness is, but that genuine humility and absorption in great and eternal aims which are its prime requisites. Apart from Christ, men may be good handicraftsmen, they may be gifted with genius that delights and aids mankind and beautifies life, they may see clearly what consti-

tutes civil prosperity, in one way or other they may materially help forward the common cause ; but if after all they are not in sympathy with the purpose of the king who rules and heads the forward movement, if their motives in using their gifts are still selfish, it can never be said to them, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." His joy is a joy they are not prepared to share, if they have sought their own advantage and not with Him sacrificed themselves to the common good. It is impossible to say who are helping and who are hindering the cause of Christ ; and happily it is not our part to judge. The aims and ideas which Christ introduced to the minds of men have so permeated society that no one can grow up in a Christian country without coming more or less in contact with them. And the Spirit of Christ may have wrought in men in ways we are quite unable to trace. But it would seem as if only through Christ it were possible for us to come into that full sympathy at once with God and with men, which we see so clearly in His life and death, and which also is our salvation from selfish isolation and all ungodliness and inhumanity. It is serviceableness which is to determine our entrance into or exclusion from the future of God ; or, as God does not desire service in which is no spirit of fellowship, but rather the intelligent and delighted co-operation of sons, it is sonship that determines our destiny. And who

but Christ enables us to see what sonship is and to become sons? How is that tender, humble, sin-fearing, reverent spirit of God's children to be produced, how has it ever been produced, save by the acceptance of Christ as God the Son dying for our sin to bring us to the Father?

## THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT ;

OR,

THE UNFORGIVING DEBTOR.

MATT. xviii. 23-35.

THE occasion of this parable was a question put by Peter. Our Lord has once again been warning His disciples against that self-sufficient spirit which makes men quarrelsome and implacable and censorious. Their ambitious temper had been again showing itself in the discussion of their favorite topic: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" They had been betraying their eagerness to be influential and important persons, their proneness therefore to despise the uninfluential and to treat with harshness the "little ones" of the kingdom, those who were weak and erring and always needing forgiveness. Our Lord therefore warns them that the little ones rather than the great ones are His care, and that provision is made in His kingdom not for those who need no forgiveness, not for those who can see only the faults and weaknesses of others, but for those who make constant demands on mercy.

But Peter, when he hears the precept that he

must gain his brother by forgiving him his trespass, foresees the very probable result, that his brother thus forgiven will repeat his offense, and puts therefore the question whether some different treatment ought not then to be adopted. "How often," he says, "shall I forgive my brother?" He knew the Jewish rule: Forgive a first offense, forgive a second, a third—punish the fourth. And he seems to wish to meet at once the most liberal sentiments of his Master in expanding this common law to more than double its original measure: "Shall I forgive him till seven times?" But this question was framed in the very spirit of the old law of retaliation. By proposing any limit whatever to forgiveness, Peter showed that he still considered that to forgive was the exceptional thing, was to forego a right which must some time be reassumed, was not an eternal law of the kingdom but only a tentative measure which at any moment may be revoked; that underneath the forgiveness we extend to an erring brother there lies a right to revenge which we may at any time assert. This feeling wherever it exists shows that we are living with retaliation for the law, forgiveness for the exception. But Christ's law is, that forgiveness shall be unlimited: "I say not unto seven times, but until seventy times seven"—that is to say an untold number of times. Seven was with the Jews the number of perfection. When time has run

through seven days, it begins again ; the circle is complete. So that no expression could more forcibly convey the impression of endless, ever-renewed, eternal iteration than "seventy times seven."

The parable is added to illustrate the hatefulness of an unforgiving spirit. In it the Lord gibbets the implacable temper of the man who refuses to extend to others the forgiveness he himself needs. His own debt of something like two millions sterling indicates that he occupied a position of trust, and had exceptional opportunity of advancing his Lord's interests. And probably the magnitude of the debt was intended not merely to suggest the vastness of the liabilities of all men to God, but also to hint to the Apostles that men so closely allied to their Lord as they were, might possibly incur a greater debt than those in an inferior position had opportunity of incurring.

It may seem as if there were some inconsistency between the two parts of our Lord's directions regarding the treatment of an offending brother. In the parable and in His direct answer to Peter's question He speaks as if the sole duty of an injured person were to forgive. In the preceding verses He speaks as if much more were needful, and indeed He lays down the principles which have ever since governed, theoretically at least, ecclesiastical prosecutions. An

injured person is not to act as a strong healthy minded, good-natured man is very apt to act. He is not to say to himself, "What does it matter that so-and-so has called me 'cheat' or 'liar;' my character will outlive his attacks; what harm has he done save to himself by circulating slanders about me, or by taking me into the extent of a few pounds? I am not going to dirty my hands or bother my head about such a poor creature." No doubt there are slight injuries of which this is the proper treatment. To notice them at all would be to make them of more importance than is wise. But this may be carried too far; and it is frequently carried too far by the easy-going pleasant-tempered men who are so agreeable an element in society. There are, says our Lord, offenses of which the proper treatment is to go to the offending party and remonstrate with him. There are few more disagreeable duties in life, but sometimes it is a duty. There are matters that come to your knowledge which you cannot pass by—you feel that if you do so, it is because of an element of cowardliness in your nature. Duty requires you to go to the offending party and endeavor to bring him to repentance.

But this treatment and all that follows it is in strict harmony with the injunction to forgive, for you are never required to forgive an impenitent person: but you are required—and this is, I think,



a duty more difficult and more frequently neglected than even the duty of forgiveness—you are required to do all you can to bring to repentance the person who has injured you. To forgive the man who has wronged you, when he comes humbling himself, admitting he was wrong and heartily begging you to forgive him, in most actual cases makes no great call on Christian charity: but to go affectionately and without a spark of vindictive feeling to the man who has done you a wrong, and strive patiently to make it as plain to him as it is to yourself that he has done wrong, and so to do this as to win your brother—this seems to be about the highest reach of Christian virtue we are likely to meet in this present world.

There is another initial difficulty. Not only do we feel it almost impossible to forgive certain injuries, but some well-instructed Christian writers explicitly maintain that there are injuries which men ought not to forgive.\* One who has done much to elevate the tone of modern literature, introduces the following lines in his most celebrated drama:

“Oh sirs, look round you lest you be deceived,  
Forgiveness may be spoken with the tongue,

\* On this point, see the remarkable chapter on Forgiveness, in “*Ecce Homo*,” from which the thought of this paragraph is derived. The Author cites a modern novelist who makes one of his characters say: “There are some wrongs that no one ought to forgive, and I shall be a villain on the day I shake that man’s hand.”

Forgiveness may be written with the pen,  
But think not that the parchment and mouth pardon  
Will e'er eject old hatreds from the heart.  
There's that betwixt you been men ne'er forget  
Till they forget themselves, till all's forgot,  
Till the deep sleep falls on them in that bed  
From which no morrow's mischief knocks them up."

It might seem then as if those who knew human life best agreed that there *is* a limitation which must be put to forgiveness, that there are injuries which no man can be expected to forgive or can forgive, that there are circumstances in which this rule of Christ's must be set aside.

Let us test this idea by a very simple instance. Some of the most thoroughly Christian and wise headmasters have been inclined to wink at fighting among their boys, taking care that it does not become too frequent nor go any serious length. And even the most forgiving and Christ-like of parents is not altogether comfortable if his boy comes home from school and tells him that he was grossly insulted and struck by a boy somewhat bigger than himself, but that instead of defending himself he forgave the offender. Why then is the parent not quite comfortable, why would most parents be really more gratified to hear that their boy had fought a bigger boy, than that when struck he had turned the other cheek? Simply because most parents might have some suspicion that softness and cowardliness had as much to do with the turning of the other

cheek as Christian feeling. If they had unmistakable proof of their boy's courage and manliness, if they were perfectly sure that fear was a quite unknown feeling to their boy, they would delight in his having forgiven insolence and ill-treatment. But unfortunately fear and a craven spirit are so much commoner than high spirit moderated by Christian temper, that wherever gross injuries are forgiven, we are apt to ascribe this apparently Christian conduct to that spirit which is at the very antipodes from the spirit of Christ. The parent does not think his boy *ought* not to forgive—nay, he is sure that is the highest and manliest, and to many boys the most difficult conduct—but until he is quite sure that in a given case the forgiveness has sprung not from a sham magnanimity thrown over a sneaking and feeble character, he is afraid to commend it.

So it is everywhere. There is *no* limitation to forgiveness; no injury so gross that it ought not to be forgiven. But there are injuries so gross that when men forgive them they are sure to be suspected of doing so from unworthy motives. So little is Christian feeling in its highest reaches and manifestations counted on, so little is it seen or even understood, that when a man forgives one who has deeply injured him, this forgiveness is apt to be ascribed to what is mean, and not to what is Christlike in the injured party. But wherever, as in the case of our Lord Himself

there is no question of the power to defeat or the courage to face one's enemies, wherever forgiveness can be ascribed only to a merciful spirit, there men do admire the disposition to forgive even the greatest of injuries.

The parable is intended to enforce the teaching of our Lord regarding forgiveness by exhibiting the unreasonableness and meanness and danger of an unforgiving spirit. The hatefulness of such a spirit is emphasized by two aggravating features:—

1. The unmerciful servant had himself required forgiveness and had just been forgiven.

2. The debt due to him was infinitesimally small when compared with the debt which had been remitted to him.

1. First, the man is not softened by the remission of his own great debt. He goes straight from the presence of his master who had forgiven him all his talents, and lays violent hands on one of his associates who happened to owe him a few shillings. Having just been forgiven, he might have been expected to remember, with humble and softened feeling, that there is a better law than retaliation. He thought mercy a good thing so long as he was the object of it. So long as he was in the presence of a creditor he had much to say of the calamity of debt, a thousand reasons to urge for the exercise of patience, and a thousand excuses for wrongdoing. Five minutes after, in

the presence of a debtor, there is to him no law in the world, but harsh and hasty exaction of dues. He is deaf to the reasons which had filled his own mouth immediately before, deaf to everything which was not a promise to pay, and that instantly.

This is no over-colored picture. It is over-colored neither as a representation of what naturally occurs in connection with pecuniary debts, nor as a picture of the treatment which sinners give to sinners like themselves. Men who begin to use the money which belongs to others, and to invest on their own account funds which either do not exist at all except in their own hopes, or which belong to others and are only passing through their hands, become deadened with surprising rapidity to all sense of the injury they do. If they prove bankrupt, it is much more their own inconvenience and loss they bewail than the wrong done to others. The enormous debtor of the parable betrayed no sense of shame, no feeling for his lord's loss, but only craven dread of slavery and personal suffering. No serious humility, no honest and thoughtful facing of the facts, no deep truthfulness have entered his spirit. He is ready to promise anything, if he can only escape present consequences.

This is a true picture of the temper in which we sometimes crave pardon. Our iniquities overtake us with a throng of painful and overwhelm-

ing consequences, and in terror we cry for forgiveness. But the distress of our own condition blinds us to the wrong we have done, and no true humiliation enters the spirit. Deadened by long self-indulgence to a sense of everything but what directly affects himself with pleasure or pain, the sinner has no thought of the deeper spiritual relations of his sin. He stupidly thinks God withholds punishment because he has made a foolish purpose of paying his dues by amending his ways. There is no deep contrition; no conscience-stricken yet joyful recognition of the relation he holds to God; no intense delight and glorying in a God capable of passing by such transgressions as his; no rising of the spirit to new attachments and new ideas; no "truth in the inward parts," but only a desire to escape, as selfish and as soft as was the desire to sin.

But the forgiving love of God, if it does not humble, hardens us. To carry an unhumiliated, self-regarding spirit through such an experience gives the finishing touch to a dehumanizing selfishness. We have a key here to the conduct of those religious persons who act as if they meant to make up for their own deficiencies by charging others with theirs; as if they supposed that the violent and unrelenting condemnation of those who offend them were the fittest exercise of their privilege as persons forgiven of God. The little taste of religion they have had seems

to have soured their temper and hardened their heart. They would be more human had they no religion at all. Just as this man proposes to build up his credit again by scrupulously exacting every farthing that others owe him, so do those who have not been thoroughly humbled by God's forgiveness show their zeal in exposing and reproving the faults of others. So far from being softened and enlarged in spirit by their own experience of mercy, they grow more punctilious in their exactions, more cruel and stiff in their demeanor.

2. Second, the petty amount of the debt he exacts is set over against the enormity of that which had been remitted to himself. You might expect that a man who had been forgiven talents would have no heart to exact pence. You would suppose that one whose eye had been fixed on a kingdom's revenue would not know how to count farthings. There is something almost incredibly mean as well as savage in this man's quick remembrance of the few pence due to himself, while he so easily dismisses from his mind the ten thousand talents due by him. But our incredulity gives way as we look at the facts which underlie the parable, and measure the debt we owe to God with the peccadilloes committed against ourselves, and which we are so slow to forget.

What are the offenses which we feel it impossible to forgive, and which alienate us from one

another? If other men do not serve us well and fulfil our expectations; if they do not throw themselves heartily into our work and perfectly accomplish what we entrusted to them, we have no forgiveness for them; they must go. Or some one has been so presumptuous as to differ from us, and has opposed the propagation of our opinions on some political, or theological, or practical matter. Or men patronize us, and make us feel insignificant; or they tell some damaging story about us; or they win the prize that we worked for, or succeed in getting possession of a little bit of property we coveted. Or has even some grand exceptional injury been done you? has your whole life been darkened and altered and obstructed by the injustice or neglect or selfishness of some one, whose influence circumstances compel you to submit to? Is there some one whom you cannot think of but with a tumult in the blood and a passionate emotion? Take the injury that is most difficult for you to forgive, and measure it with that for which you yourself need to ask forgiveness of God, and say whether you ought to be implacable and resolved on revenge.

I suppose there are few persons who have not often sat and wondered why it is that they feel so little sense of obligation to God, and so little shame that their sins are sins against Him. It is so difficult for us to have any genuine shame



before God, though so easy to feel it before men, that we are sometimes tempted to fancy that a sense of sin must after all be a fictitious feeling, and not a feeling which increases in intensity with soundness of mind and clearness of mental vision. Several considerations, however, combine to show that the representation given in the parable fairly apportions the comparative guilt of sinning against God and sinning against man. All our sins directly or indirectly touch God, while only a few touch any individual on earth. In the injuries done to yourself by other men you may be able to detect more malice, more intention to wound and injure than has entered into any sin you have committed against God. But then, what are the obligations which bind any man to your service compared with the obligations which bind you to God? For whom have you done, or for whom can you do, any portion of that which God daily does for you? Debt is measured by obligation. There can be no debt where there has been no obligation. We are not equally bound to all. We are not bound to educate another man's children as we are bound to educate our own. We can have no debt to a shopkeeper from whom we have received nothing. And our debt to God is enormous because we have received from Him benefits deep as life itself, and are bound to Him in ways as varied as the manifestations of that life. We cannot sin against one

another as we can sin against God. Just as the servant of the parable, in dealing with his lord, had intromissions with larger sums than he could touch in dealing with a fellow-servant, so in dealing with God we are lifted to relations unique in kind and of surpassing sacredness, and are involved in responsibilities of wider and deeper consequence than any that would otherwise attach to our life.

There ought, then, to be some proportion between our perception of the wrong done us and the wrong we do. If we so keenly feel the prick of a needle when inflicted on ourselves, we may be expected to consider with some compunction the gaping wounds we inflict on another. Is our shame for sin against God as intense and real as the blaze of indignation, or is it continuous and persistent as the slow-burning hate which an injury done to ourselves begets? In speaking of those who defraud or injure us we express our opinion of what wrong-doing deserves. Is our judgment as explicit, our feeling as strongly expressed in regard to our own transgressions? As strongly? But they ought to be a thousand times more vehement; there should be against ourselves an indignation such as no enemy of ours could excite against himself though his offenses were many times aggravated. And what after all, is our reputation, our happiness, our property, that we should make much wail about injury done to them? Our good name and our advancement

in the world are no doubt much to ourselves, but they are of very little moment indeed to the world at large.

The fate of the unmerciful servant tells us in the plainest language that the mere canceling of our guilt does not save us. It tells us that unless the forgiveness of God humbles us and begets within us a truly meek and loving spirit, we cannot be owned as His children. The best assurance that we are ourselves forgiven is the consciousness that the very spirit of the forgiving God is working in our own hearts towards others.

“’Tis not enough to weep my sins,  
’Tis but one step to heaven;  
When I am kind to others, then  
I know myself forgiven.”

“ He that revengeth shall find vengeance from the Lord, and He shall surely retain his sins. Forgive thy neighbor the hurt that he hath done unto thee, so shall thy sins also be forgiven when thou prayest. A man beareth hatred against another, and doth he seek pardon from the Lord? He showeth no mercy to a man who is like himself: and doth he ask forgiveness of his own sin? ” (Ecclesiasticus xxviii. 1-4) “ If ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses.” If you are hard, unrelenting; always chiding; slow to recognize merit, quick to observe faults; admitting no excuse and making no allowances; cherishing ill-

will ; still feeling resentment on account of injuries done you ten years ago ; if there are persons from whom you would if you could exact the uttermost farthing—then you have reason to fear for your own forgiveness. Can you humbly beseech God, and with tearful eyes look up to Him for pardon while you have your foot upon your brother's neck or your hand at his throat? The very fact that you are proud and unbending should itself convince you that you have never been humbled before a forgiving God. The very fact that you can be overbearing and exacting should prompt you to question most seriously whether you have in very truth let your heart be flooded with God's undeserved pardoning mercy. The very fact that in any relation of life you can carry yourself in a haughty, imperious, and unchastened manner should bid you ask whether in very truth you are at heart lowly before God as one who day by day needs His forbearance and pardon. Every bitter word you speak, every unmerciful, inconsiderate act you do, every relentless, cruel, exacting thought you have, casts suspicion on your Christianity, and makes it seem possible that your Master may yet have to mete to you with your own measure.

Thus then does the Lord lay down the law of unlimited forgiveness as a law of His kingdom. The kingdom or society He came to form, that new grouping and association of men which He

means to be eternal, cannot be held together without the observance of this law. This is one of the essential laws of His kingdom. Men are to be held together and to work smoothly together not by external compulsion, not by a police agency, not by a criminal law of alarming severity—it seems ludicrous to speak of such forces in connection with an eternal and perfect society—but it is to be held together by the inward disposition of each member of it to forgive and be on terms of brotherly kindness with every other member.

We lose an immense deal of the power and practical benefit of Christ's teaching by refusing to look at things from His point of view, and to listen as cordially to what He says of His kingdom as to what He says of individuals. We are not perhaps too much but we are too exclusively taken up with the saving of our own souls. We neglect to consider that the Bible throughout takes to do with the Church and people of God, with the kingdom, and with the individual only as a member of the kingdom. It is not for the individual alone that Christ legislates. He does not point out a path by which one man by himself can attain to a solitary bliss; but He founds a kingdom, and lays down as its fundamental law the law of love, a law which shows us that our individual happiness and our individual perfection can only be won in fellowship with others, and by

truly entering into the most enduring bonds with them. To unite us again individually to God, our Lord recognizes as only half His work: to unite us to one another is as essential. Salvation consists not only in our being reconciled to God, but also in our being reconciled to men. When we attach ourselves to Christ we become members of a society, and can no longer live an isolated life. We must live for the body we belong to. Until we catch this *esprit de corps* we are poor Christians. The man who is content if he is sure his own soul is safe has great cause to believe it in danger; for there is no surer mark of a healthy Christian than his practical acknowledgment of the claims of other men and his interest in the kingdom to which he belongs.

But how are we to attain to that thoroughly healthy state of spirit to which it shall be natural to forgive until seventy times seven? This parable indicates that the most important step towards this is taken when we learn to accept God's forgiveness in a right spirit. The true way to a forgiving spirit is to be forgiven, to go back again and again to God, and count over our debt to Him. The man who thinks justly of his own wrong-doing has no heart to make much of the injuries done to himself. He always feels how much more he has been forgiven than he can ever be called upon to forgive. His soul gladdened, softened, and humbled by a sense of the great

compassion that has remitted his great debt, loses all power to be harsh and damnatory.

We must therefore begin with the truth about ourselves. It is not required of us that we go out of our way to make an ostentatious display of our guilt, but it is requisite that we let the conviction of our great debt so sink into our minds that we shall go softly all the days of our life. It is required of us that we discover and recognize the truth about ourselves, and that we abide and walk in the truth and not in the unreal world of our own self-satisfied fancy. It is required of us that we have a character, and that this character be founded on and grow up out of God's forgiving grace. We need not proclaim to every man we meet the reason, but we must let all men see that we have a reason for loving-kindness, for humility, for gravity, for tender consideration of others, for every quality that banishes hatred from earth and welds men closer into one community.

## LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD.

FIRST LAST AND LAST FIRST.

MATT. xx. 1-16.

THE key to this parable is found in the question to which it was the answer, and in the circumstances which suggested that question. A young man of high character and still higher aspirations, but of unfortunately great wealth, had recognized in Jesus a teacher who in His own person and demeanor bore evidence that He understood how man could attain to the highest ideal. He accordingly introduced himself to our Lord as one who was bent upon achieving the highest human attainment, and who was only anxious to know what more could be done beyond what he had already accomplished. But on learning that for him the path to perfection lay through the abandonment of his great possessions, he felt that this was more than he could do, and turned away ashamed and wretched. As he passed out of sight, our Lord, sympathizing with the severity of his temptation, turned to His disciples, and with His usual form of strong asseveration, said, "Verily I say unto you, that a



rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven."

When Peter saw how keenly the Lord appreciated the difficulty of giving up property and detaching oneself from familiar comforts and employments, he suggested that those who overcame this difficulty were peculiarly meritorious. "Behold," he says, "we have forsaken all and followed Thee: what shall we have therefore?" But in asking this question Peter betrayed precisely that disposition which most thoroughly vitiates all service of Christ, the disposition to bargain, to work for a clearly defined reward and not for the sake of the work itself and in generous trust in the justice and liberality of the Master. Peter had to all appearance made, so far as was possible in his circumstances, the very sacrifice which the rich young man had declined to make; but if a sacrifice is made merely for the sake of winning for oneself some greater gain, then it is no longer a sacrifice but a bargain. Love and trust are of the essence of sacrifice. Peter had left his home, his boat and fishing gear, and all the pleasant associations of the lake: he had torn himself up by the roots; but if he had done so not from simple love of Christ which found its ample reward in His company, but with a clear understanding that he would have a good return in kind for all he had given up, then he was perhaps premature in so complacently com-

paring himself with the rich young man. It is the motive which gives virtue to any sacrifice or service. The spirit which asks what compensation is to be made for every sacrifice, is self-regarding, mercenary, greedy, not generous, trustful, loving: it confounds two things diametrically different, bargain and sacrifice.

The Lord's answer to Peter's question is twofold. He first assures His followers that they shall have ample compensation for all present loss. Sharing with Him in work, they shall share in His reward. The results He works for shall be theirs as well as His. But having given them this assurance, He takes occasion to rebuke the disposition to bargain, the somewhat craven spirit that sought to be quite sure it would take no harm by following Him. And he warns them against comparing their sacrifices and services with those of other men, affirming that many who, like the apostles, were called at the very beginning of the Lord's ministry, and were first not only in point of time, but in eminence of service, and who might therefore seem sure of a conspicuous and exceptional reward, will after all be found no better off than those whose expectations have been extremely meager. "Many shall be last that are first, and first that are last."

It was to illustrate this statement that the parable of the laborers in the vineyard was spoken. This is the point of its teaching to which all else

is subordinate. The nature of the work in the vineyard and its exhausting toil ; the unwearied compassion of the Lord of the vineyard, going out hour after hour to invite the unemployed ; these and all other details are but the feathers of the arrow helping it to fly straight to its mark ; but the point is, that those who were first hired were last paid and least paid, and this because the first-hired entered on their work in a bargaining spirit and merely for the sake of winning a calculated and stipulated remuneration, whereas the late-hired laborers did their work in faith, not knowing what they were to get, but sure they would not get less than they deserved.

The parable, then, is intended to show us the difference between work done in a bargaining spirit and work done in trust ; between the reward given to work which in quantity may be very great but in motive is mercenary, and the reward given to work which in quantity may be very small, but in motive is sound. It directs attention to the fact that in estimating the value of work we must take into consideration not only the amount done or the time spent upon it, but the motive that has entered into it. It is this which God chiefly regards. One hour of trustful, humble service is of greater value to God than a lifetime of calculating industry and self-regarding zeal. A gift that is reckoned by thousands of pounds ; an ecclesiastical endowment that makes a noise through a

whole generation ; a busy, unflagging, obtrusive zeal which makes itself seen and felt throughout a whole land, these things make a great impression upon men—and it is well if they do not make a great impression on the parties themselves who do them and prompt them inwardly to say, “What shall we have therefor”—but they make no impression upon God unless animated by a really devoted spirit. While men are applauding the great workers who ostentatiously wipe the sweat from their brows and pant so that you can hear them across the whole field, God is regarding an unnoticed worker, who feels he is doing little, who is ashamed that any one should see his work, who bitterly regrets he can do no more, who could not name a coin small enough to pay him, but who is perfectly sure that the Master he serves is well worth serving. It is thus that the first become last and the last first.

That we are meant to see this difference of spirit in the laborers is obvious alike from the terms of their respective engagements, from the distribution of the wages, and from the temper shown by the last paid men.

1. First, the parable is careful to state that those who were hired early in the day *made an agreement* to work for a stipulated sum. This sum was the usual day's wage of the period : a fair wage, which of itself was sufficient inducement to work. These men were in a condition

to make their own terms. They ruled the market. At four or five in the morning the laborers in a hiring market have a keen sense of their own value, and are in no mood to sell themselves cheap. The masters and stewards have a very hard time of it as they are hooted from knot to knot of lusty fellows with the pride of the morning in their faces, and strive in vain to pick up labor at a reasonable figure. No man in the market at that hour engages without making his own terms, without saying what So-and-so offers, without knowing to a halfpenny what he will have, and striking hands with his hirer as his equal. The laborer means to make a good thing of it for himself; if he does not like the look of one steward he chooses another, if he thinks one master's pay too little he waits for a better offer. He is not going to work all day to oblige some neighboring proprietor, he is going to work to make a good wage for himself. It's hot, hard, thirsty work, but it pays.

But in the evening the tables are turned. The masters now have it all their own way. It's no longer, "Will you give us more than So-and-so? what will you offer?" but "We'll leave that to you, sir; supper and a bed at the most is all we can expect. There's scarcely time to get to your place, but we'll hurry and do our best, if you'll have us at all." Possibly these men were the proudest in the morning, and missed their chance. Group after group of men has been detailed off

at various hours, and now the shadows begin to lengthen; their pride gives place to hunger and anxious thoughts of the coming night. They are beginning to have gloomy thoughts of lying down in the darkness, with no food to refresh them, no roof to shelter, no promise of more work from an appreciative master, no pleasant talk and song with their comrades in the vintage. But as the day wears desolately away, and as now the hard task-masters are heard on all sides beating down the wages of the jaded hirelings, there rises the considerate voice of this good and upright householder, "Go ye also into my vineyard, and whatsoever is *right*, that shall ye receive." In no condition to make a bargain, they most gladly trust themselves to one whose words have the ring of truth. They go, glad to get work on any terms; they go, not knowing what they are to get, but quite sure they are in good hands. They go humble, trusting, and grateful; the others went proud, self-confident, mercenary.

2. Secondly, the same difference in the spirit in which each set of laborers had entered on their work is implied in the striking scene which ensued at the close of the day. Those who had barely got their work begun were *first* paid, and were paid a full day's wage. There must, of course, have been a reason for this; it was not mere caprice, but was the result and expression of some just idea. It could not be that these

late-hired laborers had done as much in their one hour as the others in twelve; for the others, those who had worked the full day, are conscious of having done their work well. No hint is given that they were less skilful or less zealous than the late-hired men. We are thrown back, therefore, for the explanation on the hint given in the hiring, namely, that those who wrought merely for the sake of pay received the pay they looked for, while they who came to the vineyard conscious that they had wasted their day and not daring to stipulate for any definite wage, but leaving themselves confidently in the hands of a master they believed in, were gladdened by the unmerited reward of the fullest wage. The men who bargained were paid according to their bargain; the men who trusted got far more than they could have dared to bargain for.

The principle is more easily understood because we ourselves so commonly act upon it. The man who bargains and must have everything in black and white, and thus shows that in working for you it is himself he is looking after and seeking to profit, gets every penny he bargained for, but not a penny beyond; whereas the man who fears his work may not please you, but, if you wish it, will try and do his best, and says not a word about pay—to this man you give as much as you decently can, and always more than he is expecting. What you relish and reward, God

also relishes and rewards. It is work done with some human feeling in it that you delight in. What you give out to be done at a certain rate you accept and pay for, but take no heed of him who does it. There is nothing personal between you. He does not work for you, but for his wage. His work may be most important and thoroughly well done, it may bear the mark of time and toil upon it, but it is the work of a hireling with whom you are quits when you pay him what he contracted to receive.

3. Thirdly, the same difference of spirit among the laborers is brought out in the envious and grudging temper of the first hired and last paid men. Peter must have felt himself gravely rebuked by the picture here drawn of the man who had listened to the first call of Christ, but who, after a full, honest day's work, was found to be possessed of a selfish, grudging spirit that filled him with discontent and envy. It was now plain that this early-hired laborer had little interest in the work, and that it was no satisfaction to him to have been able to do twelve times as much as the last-hired laborer. He had the hireling's spirit, and had been longing for the shadow and counting his wages all day long. English sailors have been known to be filled with pity for their comrades whose ships only hove in sight in time to see the enemy's flag run down, or to fire the last shot in a long day's engagement. They have



so pitied them for having no share in the excitement and glory of the day that they would willingly give them as a compensation their own pay and prize-money. And the true follower of Christ, who has listened to the earliest call of his Master and has reveled in the glory of serving Him throughout life, will from the bottom of his heart pity the man who has only late in life recognized the glory of the service, and has had barely time to pick up his tools when the dusk of evening falls upon him. It is impossible that a man whose chief desire was to advance his Master's work, should envy another laborer who had done much less than himself. The very fact that a man envies another his reward is enough of itself to convict him of self-seeking in his service.

The difference in the spirit of the workers which is thus brought out in the parable will be found, says our Lord, in the Church, and it will be attended with like results at the time of judgment and award. Here also "many that are first shall be last," not all, but many; so commonly will this be exemplified that there must be something in the nature of the case inducing it. Many who have done the largest works shall receive the smallest reward. Many first in man's esteem shall be last in God's reckoning. Many who have borne the burden and heat of the day, who have been conspicuous in the work of the church, whose

names are identified with certain charities or philanthropic institutions will be rated below obscure individuals who have almost no work at all to point to. Many who have served longest in the Lord's vineyard have a consciousness that they are the great workers, which likens them to the self-complacent Peter rather than to the humble, trustful, self-ignoring spirit of the late-hired laborers. So, many who are most forward in the work of the Church and of the world are plainly animated by motives which are not above suspicion, that nothing is more obvious or more commonly remarked upon than that "many are called but few chosen." Many make trial of the work, and labor vigorously in it, but few have the purity of motive which gives them an abiding place, and wins the approval of Christ. And they especially are tempted to faultiness of motive who are first in work; they are impressed with their own consequence; they find it difficult to avoid inwardly comparing themselves with those who waste their day; and moreover, many of those who live outwardly blameless and correct lives, and who abound in practical work, do so because they are originally of a calculating disposition.

But though many of the first, yet not all of them shall be last. This also we know to be true. Some at least of the best known workers in the vineyard, some who entered it early and never

left it for an hour, some who scarcely once straightened their backs from toil, and dropped asleep as they came to the end of their task, knowing nothing but God's work their whole life through, have also wrought in no bargaining spirit, but passed as humble a judgment on their work as the last and least and lowest of their fellow-laborers on theirs. It is a thing that recalls the mind from thinking cynically and contemptuously of human nature to find how often the highest faculty, the most conspicuous and helpful gifts are used with absolute humility and lowliness, with scarcely one conscious thought that great good is being done. Happily there are some first who shall remain first ; first at their work, and foremost in it ; first in the field for amount and quality of work done, and yet first also in reward, because first in unaffected forgetfulness of self and pure devotedness to their Master's interests, and to the work itself. As it is often the man who is first in the breach who least understands why men should praise him for courage, he himself having had no thought of danger ; as the charitable man who has helped countless miserable creatures and made sacrifices which could not be hid, is distressed when his friends speak of making public recognition of his charity, so some who have most materially advanced the cause of Christ and of humanity are precisely those who think most shamefacedly of what they have done, and are unfeignedly as-

tonished to hear they have been of any service, and cannot once connect the idea of reward with any toil they have undergone.

Again, as there are some first who remain first, so there are some last who remain last. Not all who enter the vineyard late enter it humbled. Not all who do little do it well. Mercenariness is not confined to those who have some small excuse for it. Even those who have wasted their life, and bring but the wreck of it into the kingdom, are sometimes possessed with a complacency and shamelessness that are astonishing to those who know their past history. To come to Christ late, and to come unhumbled, is the culminating exhibition of human complacency. To bring to the vineyard neither strength to labor nor purity of motive is the extreme of unprofitableness.

This parable, rightly read, gives no encouragement to late entrance into the Lord's service. To think of this service as that which we can add at any convenient time to the other work of life is to mistake it altogether. The service of Christ should cover the whole of life; and what is not done as a part of His work may in some respects as well not be done at all. All outside His vineyard is idleness. You may be busily, painfully engrossed in worldly business, and yet absolutely idle as to what conscience persistently reminds you is the one thing needful. Your life may be far through, as years go, but the main

business of it not yet begun: your prospects always improving, yourselves no better than when you began. If there are those among you who feel this painfully enough, who keenly feel the vanity of life, who have tasted its distresses and disappointments, who know how little it all comes to, a few pleasures, a few excitements, one or two great changes, a great deal of dull labor, and a good many sorrows, and then the plunge into oblivion; if there are those who would welcome anything that would put a heart and a purpose into the whole, and lift every part of life up out of the low and despicable rut in which it for the most part moves, then why do you hesitate to respond when Christ says, "Why stand ye here all the day idle? Go ye into My vineyard, and what is right ye shall receive?" Do you not believe Him? Do you fancy that He will suffer you to spend yourself in what is despicable, and fruitless, and disappointing? Why waste your day? Why waste another hour of it, if there is real work to be done, if there is work of such importance to be done that He Himself left heaven to do it, if there is work to be done that the world needs, that men will be the better for, if there is the least opening for you to put your hand to what will stand God's inspection, why go on idling and frittering your one precious life away on what you yourself despise and are weary of?

Let us then examine ourselves in the light of

this parable. Our Lord pointedly invites us to work for Him, to live for Him, and to do so in the assurance that whatsoever is right He will give. These laborers who went in faith got more than the men who had made what they considered a good bargain. In other words, you are as sure to be rewarded for every hour you spend in Christ's service as if you had His written bond and had made your own terms. If you had considered what you would like in return for anything you do for Him, and if you had stipulated for this, you would not thus have so much as you are sure to have by simply leaving it to Him. We need not concern ourselves about the future: we need not be mentally counting our wages; He would have us fall in love with the service, so that even though there were to be no reward at all, we should still choose it as the most honorable, the most useful, the most joyful way of spending our life, indeed as the one service which is perfect freedom, and satisfies our idea of what life should be. The slow, hesitating, suspicious person that thinks Christ wants to use him for some ends that are not the proper ends of human life, the foolish person that always feels as if Christ did not understand what it is that gives the truest relish to human life—such persons are not the laborers He desires. The bargaining spirit gets what it bargains for, but also gets His rebuke: the spirit that is too broken to bargain, too crushed and

self-diffident to make terms, but can only go and work and trust, gets a reward that carries in it the hearty approval and encouragement of the Lord. Are you then in His vineyard at all, or are you still among the unhappy ones who cannot decide, or among those who have looked at the vineyard in the distance, and have fallen asleep in the market-place and are dreaming they are in it? or are you among those who eagerly watch for the reappearance of the Master, and as soon as He turns the corner of the street offer themselves to Him? He calls you now; He calls you every hour of the day. And if already in His service, are we among those who wish to know what they are to get or make by it? or do we leave all that to Him and enter His work because we are weary of idleness and sick at heart with hope deferred, or sore with the ill-usage we have received from other masters?

None of us, surely, dare push this parable aside and pass on into life without satisfying our conscience about this matter. Many of us are called. Many of us are in the vineyard, and have long been in it. We have borne, in a mild fashion, the burden and heat of the day. We have given money; we have spent a great deal of time; we have performed a number of worrying duties. And we mean to go on. Well, in what spirit have we labored? Has it been to earn or maintain a reputation, or to make our influence felt?

Has it been under a dim impression that such works and sacrifices are necessary in those who claim to be Christians? Have you rendered them as a kind of payment to enable you to maintain the feeling that you are Christ's people? Have you striven to help others mainly for the sake of doing yourself good, of helping out your own salvation, and keeping your own hands clean? Has your object been advantage to yourself, either future or present, spiritual or worldly? If so, you will have your penny, but the cordial approval of your master goes to others. You may say, Is it not right to aim at our own salvation, and do those good works which are needful for that purpose? Certainly it is right to save yourself, but it is better to save ten other people. It is he who loses sight of his own interests and forgets himself because he is so much taken up with the common work and the common good that finds he has won the highest reward.

Look, then, to your motives. See that it be pure love of the work and love of the Master that draw you to it. Actions are always within our own power. Hard work is always possible, and great sacrifices almost any man can make. It is the motive that is unattainable save by those whom Christ Himself has renewed.



## THE TWO SONS.

MATT. xxi. 28, 32.

THE three parables of which this is the first were spoken at one time, and that the most critical of our Lord's life. He had come to Jerusalem knowing the danger of doing so, but also persuaded that it was now high time to bring matters to an issue. He saw that things were now ripe for a public manifestation of Himself as the Christ. A career of obscure philanthropy in Galilee could no longer be pursued. The time was past for His laying His hand on the mouth of those who would have published His majesty and proclaimed their conviction that He was the Son of God. He goes to Jerusalem, that in the temple itself and before the chief priests and constituted authorities, He may again proclaim His own dignity, and be explicitly and finally received or rejected. Accordingly He makes it impossible for the authorities any longer to overlook His actions. They are compelled by the growing excitement of the people to appoint a deputation of their best men to wait upon Him. This deputation challenge His right to teach in

this unlicensed way, and put to Him the testing question, "By what authority doest thou these things," no doubt with the expectation that He would claim Divine authority, and so give them a handle against Him. But our Lord declines to give any account of His authority further than what was manifest in His words and deeds themselves. If they could not see divine authority in the things themselves, if they did not feel that in His presence they were in the presence of God, they were not likely to see or to feel the Divine presence merely because He said it was there.

It is astonishing with what persistency numbers of persons continue to make the demand of these priests, and put themselves in the condition our Lord condemns. They will not accept a thing as Divine because it has the attributes of Divinity attaching to it, but they ask for further evidence. They will not accept a teacher as inspired, because of the truth he utters, but ask for an authority external to himself, and over and above his teaching, which shall guarantee it to them. They will not bow before Christ Himself, because their whole nature finds in Him the highest and best they know; but, like these ignorantly dishonest priests, they ask for His authority. They ask for a guarantee outside of Himself which shall warrant them in trusting Him, as if there could be any possible guarantee so perfect as the actual moral supremacy they feel Him to possess. That

man's faith is resting on a very precarious foundation who believes not because the truth itself has laid hold upon his conscience, but because he is yielding to authority ; who accepts Christ, not because he finds in Christ the true Lord of His spirit, but because the claims of Christ are established by what is external to His person.

Jesus, however, is not content merely to evade their entangling question. He turns their assault against themselves, and so leads the conversation that they are compelled to utter their own condemnation in presence of the multitude. The parable is too plain-spoken to be evaded. They cannot deny that the satisfactory Son is not the one who professes great respect for His father's authority, while he does only what pleases himself, but the one who does his father's bidding, even though he has at first disowned His authority. They are compelled, that is, to own that a mere bowing to God's authority and professing that they attach great weight to it is of no account in God's sight unless it be accompanied by an actual doing of the things He enjoins. John came to you, our Lord says to the priests and elders, in the way of righteousness, enjoining the works that belong to the kingdom of God, setting clear before your conscience the duties actually incumbent on you. You felt he was God's messenger, the words he spoke proved him to be so ; the holy conduct he enforced compelled you in-

wardly to own him a messenger of God to you you dare not now in the presence of these people deny that he was from God. Why then did you not do his bidding? He was God's messenger, he told you plainly who the Christ was, and yet you believed him not. You refused to work the work of God peculiar to your time and office, the work of acknowledging and believing in the Son of God, witnessed by John whom ye yourselves know to be a true witness. You come now and ask Me for my authority as if, were you convinced it was Divine, you would gladly yield to it; as if you were anxious to know God's will, as if there were on your lips constantly the "I go, sir," of this Son, whereas already it has been made clear to your own conscience what God would have you do regarding Me, and yet you obey Him not. These publicans and harlots whom you despise and loathe are in the kingdom of God while you are outside; for bad as they were and daringly as they had disowned God's authority, and little profession of belief in God as they made, they yet repented when John proclaimed the coming kingdom, and have believed in and submitted to the King.

These men were thus unceremoniously dealt with by our Lord because they were false. They may not have clearly seen that they were false, but they were so. They were false because they professed to be anxious for additional evidence

regarding Christ, while already they had sufficient evidence. They were resisting the light already shed into their conscience, and yet professed a desire for further light. And probably in no age of the world's history have there been so many in their state of mind as in our own. There is a very general misapprehension as to the amount and kind of evidence that may reasonably be demanded in favor of Christ's claims, and also as to the manner in which the evidence may be expected to find entrance into the mind and produce conviction. And it is certain that unless we use the light we have and follow it, we are not likely to reach fuller light. If we are at present sure that at any rate the moral teaching of Christ is healthy, let us practise that teaching; for, if we do not, we reject the aid which more than any other is likely to bring us to Christ's own point of view, and to open our sympathies with His purpose and to enlighten us regarding His whole position.

The application of the parable, then, to those to whom our Lord was speaking could not be misunderstood. The first son—the man who at first said he would not go but afterwards repented and went—was the representative of the publicans and harlots. They had openly asserted their unwillingness to work for God: they had made no professions of obedience, they had decidedly turned their backs on everything good.

They had lived in open sin, and were not surprised that men should denounce them as hopelessly corrupt. The lad that plainly told his father he was not going to the vineyard but meant to have a holiday with his boon companions would not have been more astonished to be called a dutiful and obedient son, than these publicans and harlots would have been had any one addressed them as good and godly people. They knew they were doing wrong: they were conscious of their wickedness. But John's preaching went to their hearts, because he assured them that even for them there was an open gate into the kingdom of God. They repented because they were assured that for them there was a place for repentance and a way back to purity of conscience, to holiness of life, to God.

The priests and elders, the men who represented all that was respectable and religious in the country, were depicted in the second son who promptly said he would go and work for his father, but did not do so. This son gives his answer in the one word "I," as if he meant, "Oh! you need have no doubt about me. I am ready. I am at your service. My brother is a shameless fellow, but as for me you have only to command me." This son takes it for granted he is the dutiful son; he puts no pressure on himself to secure obedience; he is conscious of no necessity to guard against temptations to forgetfulness, to

indolence, to selfishness. He takes for granted that no deficiency will be found in him, and his complacency is his ruin. We all know this kind of man: the tradesman to whom you give elaborate instructions, and who assures you he will send you an article precisely to your mind, but actually sends you what is quite useless for your purposes; the friend who bids you leave the matter to him, but who has no sooner turned the corner of the street than he meets some one whose conversation puts you and your affairs clean out of his mind. If promising had been all that was wanted, no community could have been more godly than Jerusalem. These priests and elders spent their lives in professing to be God's people. Their day was filled with religious services. They had no secular business at all; they were identified with religion; their whole life was a proclamation that they were God's servants, and a profession of their willingness to obey. And yet they failed to do the one thing they were there to do. They heard John's teaching, they knew it was the voice of God, but they refused to prepare their hearts and understandings, as he taught them, that they might recognize Christ. The one thing that John commanded them to do, to prepare for and receive the King, they failed to do. Their whole profession collapsed like a burst bubble; they were proved to be shams, to be dealing in mere words with no idea of realities.

It is natural to suppose that the religious world will in every generation present similar phenomena. It requires no exceptional discernment to see that in our own day the spiritual condition of these priests and elders is abundantly reproduced. There are many now whose life is in great part devoted to various ways of declaring a willingness to serve God, but whose life is also marked by disobedience. If you listen to what these persons say you would fancy they were God's most industrious servants; if you look at what they do you find nothing done for God at all, or that their own peculiar and chief duty is neglected. Every person, therefore, who is conscious that he resembles this son in professing a willingness to do God's will, should consider whether he does not also resemble him in leaving that will undone. We seem to be anxious to discover what God would have us do. We read His word—we go where we hear it explained and enforced—we are rather proud of our exceptional knowledge of its meaning—we seem to set great value on any hand that will point out the way, on any voice that will say to us: There, that is the work for you.

But does not this forwardness in hearing what God's will is sometimes take the place of our doing it? Do we not sometimes mistake our zeal in hearing good counsel about spiritual things for a zeal in God's service? Is not our knowledge, or our pious feeling, or our known



sympathy with religion, allowed to stand for actual work done? Are we not sometimes as satisfied with ourselves when we have seen clearly the reasonableness and desirableness of serving God, and when we have felt some desire to serve Him, as if we had, in fact, made a sacrifice in our business for the sake of righteousness? We congratulate ourselves on feeling well-disposed, we complacently number ourselves among God's people, we think with satisfaction of our clear and moving views of Christ's work; and when all these clear views and pious feelings have passed away without any result in the shape of work done, we still congratulate ourselves on having cherished them. There may be some doubt about our morality, but there can be none about our religion. Men may not be quite sure how far they can trust us in a business transaction; our influence at home may not be of the best kind; but no one can have any doubt that if the religious men of the city were convened our name would appear among the invited.

Let us then deal honestly with ourselves, and wipe off the reproach of promising without performing, and of staying among the mere preliminaries of obedience. God has desired us not only to think right, to cherish certain feelings, to maintain certain observances, but He has enjoined all those things as helps and incentives to the doing of His will. He has said to each of

us, "Go, work." His call comes to us in this form. If you have any connection with God at all, He has said to you, "Go, work." And it is a poor reason, surely, to offer for our not working, that we have seen most clearly the reasons for working, and that no one has been more ready to promise obedience. Which of you, being a parent, would not stand amazed, if, when you challenged your child for not doing what you had told him, he were to say in excuse, "But I promised to do it; I know that I ought to have done it." Would you not fear that some strange obliquity of moral vision had affected your child; and would you not fear lest a child who could offer so utterly unreasonable an excuse might fall into the most flagrant and enormous vices?

The question, then, is, What have you *done*? The passer-by who saw the one son stripped and hard at work under the sun among the vines, while the other lounged simperingly on the road telling people what an admirable man his father was, and what a pleasure it was to work for him, and how much he hoped the vintage would be abundant—I say, the passer-by would have not the slightest difficulty in forming a judgment of the two sons. Would he that has noted your habits—and many have noted your habits—feel quite sure you were God's obedient son? Would he think it absurd to ask whether you had *said* you would obey, having the far better proof of

an obedient spirit, that you were actually obeying? So judge yourself. Do not believe in your purpose to serve God better until you do serve Him better. Give no credit to yourself for anything which is not actually accomplished. Do not let us be always speaking of endeavors, and hopes, and intentions, and struggles, and convictions of what is right, but let us at last *do* God's will.

The other son bluntly refused at first to go and do his father's bidding. His father had addressed to him a most reasonable request, and applied to him an epithet much more endearing than our word "Son;" but he is answered with a harsh, surly refusal. There is no attempt made by the son to excuse himself or soften the refusal; no mention of previous engagements, private business of his own, or necessary duties elsewhere. He is unfeeling and wantonly rude, as well as disobedient. He represents, therefore, those who are rather forward in their repudiation of God's authority. So far from desiring to be considered godly, they rather affect a deeper, more resolute ungodliness than they feel, a more vicious wickedness than belongs to them. They flaunt their opposition to all that is Christian.

Such persons are frequently the subjects of a peculiar delusion. Being themselves quite honest and open in their ungodliness, they profess and cultivate a special abhorrence of hypocrisy. No

character is so contemptible in their eyes as that which pretends to grace, and thus loses the pleasure both of sin and of holiness; and amidst all their enjoyments there are few greater than that which proceeds from the unmasking of some professed Christian. They seem to think hypocrisy the crowning sin; and so zealously do they cultivate their skill in detecting it that they become blind to every other. Like well-trained hounds, they know no game but that they are trained to hunt. And thus they actually glide into the belief that because they are not hypocrites, they are not in a dangerous position. But if a man is going to destruction, it is, after all, a poor consolation that he is doing so with his eyes open. Is it not time for a man to bethink himself, when he finds matter for self-gratulation in the fact that he does not make the smallest profession of serving God or of seeking to be saved? You are honest in refusing to assume a character you do not possess, but are you wise to refuse the real attainment of that character? You are honest in seeking to be known for what you are, but are you wise to be what you are? Could you not be equally honest were you nearer to God and liker Him? It will not stand you in the day when God takes account of His servants to say that you never professed to serve Him.

But the whole history of this first son is not that he refused to labor for his father; he after-

wards repented and went. Perhaps the hurt look of his father had shot some compunction into his soul. Perhaps the very roughness of his own voice had startled him, and suddenly revealed to him how far he had gone in sin, and how fast his heart was hardening. Perhaps the weary gait of his aged and unassisted father, his feeble efforts to accomplish tasks that required younger sinews than his, his evidently heart-broken and listless and mechanical way of setting about the work—perhaps this smote the young man's heart as he lay sunning himself in indolence, and recalled old days when he was happy with his father, and went to carry the tools he was too young to use; and the old feelings of filial affection rose again within him,—he repented and went to the vineyard.

Are there none who know that it is time for them to follow this youth's example; none who are conscious they have not done their duty towards God; who have made no pretense even of doing God's will, but have persistently shut their eyes to His love, denied His claims, and despised His commandment? Do you feel no compunction? Are you worse than even those publicans and harlots who no sooner learned there was forgiveness and a clean life for them than they eagerly sought God? Do you prefer a life every hour of which pains and grieves your heavenly Father, and a life which in itself is condemned by God and man; do you prefer a life which in your

sober moments you cannot yourself approve, and which lacks all tenderness towards God and all truth and purity, to a life which God Himself calls you to as worthy of you and as the beginning of never-ending blessedness? Were it possible for God to call you by name and from His unseen dwelling this moment to break silence and call you to work for Him, were He to tell you of His love for you and to invite you to turn to Him, would you refuse Him, *could* you refuse Him? Does He not then summon you now? Does He not do even more than this? Does He not speak within your own heart, and cause you to feel it were well and wise to meet with humble welcome all His overtures? Can you rest under the stigma of a hard-heartedness that cannot be moved by infinite tenderness? Can you rest content to turn away to your own private employments and ways while God offers you that which will make your whole work and your whole life true?

As a whole, this parable shows us how God is served by men, and shows us especially that though there are greater and less degrees of disobedience and impenitence, there is no such thing as consistent uniform obedience. The best that God gets from earth is the obedience of repentance. Men must still, each for himself, try their own way, and only when this is found to be quite foolish and hurtful and hopeless, do they try God's way. No one can take God's word for

it that such and such are the things to be done ; such and such others to be avoided. We must for ourselves know good and evil, we must be as gods making choice between the good that sin brings and its evil, and if then God's judgment about sin tallies with our own, we accept it. Such a thing as simple, perpetual acceptance of God's commands from first to last is not to be found ; and repentance, though certainly to be rejoiced over, is, after all, only the second best thing. Apology, however sincere, is at all times a very poor substitute for conduct that needs none.\* And yet you will often see that a man considers that a graceful apology, whether to God or men, more than repairs the wrong he has done.

Let us then be on our guard lest even our repentance be sin, and our humiliation tainted with pride. When we come to God with apology for neglect of duty, we are often as proud of having insight enough to see deeply into the evil of our hearts as we are humbled by a sense of the wrong we have done in omitting whole years of service. We seem to be more worthy of praise for discovering the sinfulness of a past action than of blame for committing it. We are secretly flattered by finding that we are taking our place among those who have a fine discernment of the higher duties of the Christian life and of the secret and subtle iniquities of the human heart, and when we con-

\* So John Foster in his "Lectures."

fess these, it is with less shame than complacency. Through all our confession there is running a silent, "I thank Thee, Lord, that I am not as other men, who could not confess such sins as I am confessing, because they are still down among the glaring and immoral wickednesses, and have not so much as thought of those duties that I have been striving after." It is, no doubt, right to be convinced we have been wrong, it is right to turn in to God's vineyard, even though it be after refusing to do so, but that complacency should mingle with our repentance is surely a triumph of duplicity. To make our very confession of total unprofitableness matter of self-gratulation is surely the extreme of even religious self-deception.

But if we carry anything at all with us from this parable, it must be this: How greatly our knowledge is in excess of our action. Our Lord easily elicited from these persons an unqualified condemnation of conduct which precisely represented their own. They held in their minds principles which, had they only been applied to their own conduct, would have made them very different men. This reproach never passes from the world: all of us know more than we practise. In the best of us there lies unused a large amount of instructive, stimulating, consolatory knowledge. The worst regulated life, the conduct which is most shameful and hurtful, is frequently that



of a thoroughly intelligent and well-instructed person. In the mind of the most careless among us there is held truth enough to save the world, and principles which, if only applied, would form an unblemished character. And which of us, when we recount and condemn the faults of others, does not show an intelligence and a zeal for virtue of which there is small sign in some parts of our own life ?

The question which this parable suggests is not, what do you know ? but, what are you doing ? not, have you acknowledged the righteousness of God's demands ? have you seen that it is good for you to obey ? do you own and constantly profess that you are His servants ? but, have you *done* what God has given to you to do ? God has commanded you to love Him with all your heart and strength ; you know you ought, but have you done it ? He has told you that this especially is the work of God, that you believe on Him whom He hath sent ; have you done it ? He calls you to work for Him, to consider what you can do to forward what is good, to set before you as your aim in life not advantage of any kind to yourself, but righteousness in yourself and in others. Do not despair of doing something useful ; there are ways in which you can be helpful. These publicans and harlots might well have thought there was no room for them to do good in the community, and that their tastes

were such that they could never love purity and truth and unselfishness. You may feel the same. You may feel that if you do the external duty you yet have no love for it, and you cannot bear to look forward to a life in which at every step you will require to put compulsion on yourself to do so. But such will not be the case. Do the duty, and the spirit will come. Obey God, and you will learn to love Him. Compel yourself to all duties now, and soon you will like the duties that are now distasteful. The man that is drawn out of the water half-drowned can only be restored by artificial respiration, but, if this is persevered in, the natural breathing at last begins, and the functions of healthy, unforced respirations supersede the artificial means. And thus God educates us to ease and naturalness in all duty. Under cover of the outward conduct, the new spirit grows and grows to such strength that at last it maintains the outward conduct as its natural fruit.

## THE WICKED HUSBANDMEN.

MATT. xxi. 33-45.

“HEAR another parable,” says our Lord to these ecclesiastical dignitaries who were probably feeling that they had heard quite enough already. Their dignity, they felt, was suffering in the eyes of the mob, who could not fail to see that the tables had been turned against them, and who rarely conceal the rough relish they have in contemplating the discomfiture of pompous ignorance and sanctimonious arrogance. If there flew round the circle none of those jeering remarks or smart personal hits which would inevitably have been elicited from an English crowd, there would not be wanting significant nods and satisfied smiles which would show with equal clearness to the priests and elders that in seeking to expose the pretensions of Jesus they had only exposed themselves. Their falseness in disguising their reluctance to accept Jesus as the Christ under pretense of seeking further evidence, was with a wonderful facility laid bare to all. They stood convicted of refusing to accept the testimony of one whom they dared not deny to be from God.

They stood convicted of having incapacitated themselves for recognizing the divine in Jesus. But theirs is not the guilt of the common unbeliever; it was not merely their personal duty and interest to keep themselves awake to the divine by righteousness of life, it was their official duty as well. It was the duty for which their office existed. They must therefore be shown up as men who are hollow shams, who are complacently maintaining their official dignity and the routine and forms of their office, while they are wholly oblivious of its one great object. They are worse than useless. They are as agents whom a man has appointed to manage his business or his property for him, and who use their positions for embezzling the entire proceeds, and enriching themselves at his expense.

The parabolic dress under which this warning or judgment is carried home to them is a very thin veil, through which no one could fail to discern the living truth. The liberally cared-for vineyard, furnished with every advantage to facilitate productiveness, was of course Israel, hedged off from the outlying and less cared for fields of heathenism, and furnished with all that goes to fructify human nature. As God had long since declared, nothing that could be done had been left undone. As many men will go to any expense in improving their property, trying new methods, providing the best implements, taking

a pride in having every road and fence in good repair, so everything had been done in Israel that could be expected to fertilize human nature. A small section of humanity had been railed off, and the experiment was made that it might be seen to what a pitch of productiveness this most fruitful of God's plants could be brought. A family or race of men was chosen and set apart for the very purpose of receiving every advantage which could help men to produce the proper fruit of man; to maintain a vigorous, healthy life, and to yield results which might seem to justify the care spent on them. There was to be a nursery of virtue, where any one would only have to look in order to see what proper cultivation could effect. Here it was to be shown that barbarism, degradation, violence, lust, and idolatry were not the proper fruit of human nature. In this garden man was to receive every possible aid and inducement to development and productiveness: nothing was wanting which could win men to holiness, nothing which could enlarge, purify, fertilize human nature.

And what was the result? The result was that which every reformatory in the country gives, namely, that human nature in the abstract is one thing; in the concrete, in the individual, another; that as some soils simply absorb all that you can put into them and give no sign, so do most men simply absorb all manner of inducements,

counsels, warnings, aids, and bring forth nothing serviceable to God or man. Even persons professing religion are quite contented, nay, even think they are making vast attainment and thriving magnificently, when they are merely receiving, and doing nothing or little. They measure themselves by the care God is spending on them, not by the fruit they are yielding; by the amount of instruction they have received and retain, not by the use they have made of it; by the grace spent upon them, and not by the results. In short, they make the blunder which subverts the whole of religion, of turning means into ends.

But in this parable it is not the plants that are censured for barrenness, but the keepers of the vineyard that are condemned for unfaithfulness to the owner. The fruit borne, whether more or less than common, was intercepted by the husbandmen. They used their position solely for their own advantage. That is to say, the priests and elders of the Jews had fallen into the common snare of ecclesiastical leaders, and had used the dignity and advantageous position of their office for their own behoof, and had failed to remember that they had it only as God's servants. The religious leader is quite as liable as the political or military leader to be led by a desire for glory, applause, notoriety, distinction, power. And the Church is quite as open a field for the

exercise and manifestation of such unworthy motives as the State is.\* The Church, being a society of men, must be managed by the usual methods, which all societies of men adopt. There must be combination, contrivance, adjustment, discussion, laws and regulations. The Church in its outward system and movements must be wrought by the same machinery as other large associations use. And it is notorious that the mere working of this machinery requires no spiritual faculty in the persons who manage it. It calls into exercise a certain class of gifts and faculties, certain talents and qualities which are eminently serviceable, but which may equally be exercised for the State or for the Church, for the world or for God. The political leader who negotiates with foreign powers, who foresees calamity and has skill to avert it, who can control large bodies of men and keep vast organizations in noiseless motion, may exercise these great gifts either for his country and his God, or merely for the sake of making or maintaining his reputation as the most influential man of his generation. And the ecclesiastic who has very much the same kind of work to do, feeling the pulse of the theological and ecclesiastical world, making out through the distorting haze of public report and opinion what are the facts of a case and what is

\* See the late Canon Mozley's Sermon on "The Reversal of Human Judgment."

best to be done in it, and talking over to his view large bodies of men—this man, like the politician, may be serving his God, or he may be serving himself. Success may be the idol of the one as truly as of the other. To have a large religious following and wide influence in the Church may be as thoroughly selfish and worldly a desire as to be at the head of a strong political party. It is not the sphere in which one's work is done that proves its spirituality or worldliness; neither is it always the nature of the work that is done, but the motive that tests whether it is spiritual or worldly. These priests and elders had not escaped the snare into which their predecessors had fallen, and to which all their successors are exposed. They had used their position to attract applause to themselves, or to make their influence felt in the community, or to win for themselves a name as defenders of the faith.

Another and still more insidious form of the same temptation it may be worth while to notice. It is that temptation to which our Lord alluded when He censured this same class of persons for their zeal in proselytizing. But why so? Is not zeal in propagating religion a good thing? If these foremost men in the Jewish Church compassed sea and land to make one proselyte, is this not that very missionary zeal which the Jews are upbraided for wanting, and the modern Church prides itself on possessing? Is evangelistic fervor



in the nineteenth century a thing to applaud, while the same fervor in the first is to be condemned? or what was it in these men's zeal that so roused our Lord's indignation? It was that same element which so often still taints zeal for the propagation of religious truth—the desire rather to bring men over to my way of thinking and so to strengthen my own position, than to bring them to the truth. My way of thinking may be the truth, or may, at least, be much nearer it than the opinions held by others, and for them it may be a good thing to be brought over to my views; but for myself it is a bad thing and the mere strengthening of a selfish craving, if I seek to propagate my opinions rather because they are mine than because they are the truth. And how wide-spreading and deep-reaching an evil this is, those well know who have observed religious controversy and seen how dangerously near propagandism lies to persecution. The zeal that proceeds from a loving consideration for others does not, when resisted, darken into violence and ferocity. The mother seeking to persuade her son does not become fierce when opposed, but only increasingly tender and pitifully gentle. The zeal for truth that storms at opposition and becomes bitter and fierce when contradicted, you may, therefore, recognize as springing from a desire rather to have one's own wisdom and one's own influence acknowledged than from

either deep love for others or deep regard for the truth as the truth.

But to return—the implied and slightly disguised condemnation of the parable our Lord proceeds to enforce in an explicit form. The truth which had been sheathed in the parable He thrusts home now with naked point. “The kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.” And this warning is grounded not on a parable, which they might have affected to despise, but on a passage of the very Scriptures they professed to be the guardians of. There had been the warning before their eyes, read by them, sung by them at their festivals, carefully treasured in their memories; and yet, like us all, they had so little penetrated to its sense, had so little thought out its meaning and possible application, had looked upon it so much as a dead letter and so little as alive for them and for all men, that our Lord has yet to ask them: “Did ye never read in the Scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner?” Is not this stone the same as the heir sent by the lord of the vineyard? Are not ye now in danger of fulfilling the prophecy ye know so well? Are you not about to reject and cast contempt on one whom in your souls you know to be worthy of far other treatment?

The careful reader of this conversation will be

struck with two points in it—first that Jesus claims to be the heir of God; in other words, He deliberately sets Himself on a wholly different level from the other prophets—high above Isaiah, Elijah, nay, even high above Moses himself. They were all servants; He is in quite a different relation to the proprietor, that is, to God. He is the Son and Heir; in acting for God He acts for Himself. It is because the vinedressers identify Him with the owner that they have a hope of gaining possession of the vineyard by killing the heir. To kill a mere servant would have served no such purpose, another servant can always be appointed; however high his office and title, another can always be raised, and equal authority can be delegated to him; but there is no other son. It is nature and relationship, not mere official dignity, that underlies this title and that is implied in the parable.

But the second point is even more worthy of remark. Our Lord implies that this was known by these Jewish leaders. Their condemnation was, that knowing Him to be the Son of God, they slew Him. Peter, indeed, apologetically says that they would not have slain Him had they known He was the Lord of glory. It may have been so in some instances; and, no doubt, had they allowed the fact to stand clear before their minds, had they given free course to it and weight to it, they could not have done what they did.

Still, as the parable shows, it was just because they knew this was the heir that they were so eager to remove Him. Their state of mind is perfectly intelligible and very common. There lay latent in them a deep consciousness which they would not allow to become distinct and influential. They had a conviction that Jesus was the Christ, but they would not let their mind dwell upon it. There are few of us who have not such buried convictions, few of us who do not leave out of sight thoughts which, if allowed influence, would urge us to unwelcome action. There are thousands who have a haunting suspicion that Jesus deserves a very different kind of recognition from that which they give Him. Is there not lying in the mind of some of you half-formed thoughts about Jesus, possible if not actual convictions, which if you carefully thought them out would lead you to take up a different and much more satisfactory attitude towards Him?

And if there are those who feel that things should be plainer, that the majesty of Christ should be so borne in upon the soul that all would yield to Him, this is natural ; but it is to overlook the fundamental fact that room must be left for freedom of choice and the exercise of judgment. The fact is, that the rejection of Christ by so many is one of the proofs that He is Divine. It is worldly worth that is acknowledged by all, and worldly blessings that are universally ac-

cepted. The higher the blessing, the fewer accept it. All wish plenty to eat, a minority value good education, a few seek the kingdom of God. And so our Lord here points out that it had long been foreseen that when He came He would be rejected. In reply to those questioners who ask how He can allow the Hosanna Psalm to be applied to Him by the people, He takes this very psalm, and out of it proves to the authorities that their very resistance and rejection of Him is the proof that He is what the crowd were affirming Him to be—the Messiah, the Son and Heir of God, the Stone despised of the builders, but chosen of God. Rejection by the builders was one of the marks by which the foundation chosen by God was to be identified. Truth is often more convincingly exhibited by the opposition of a certain class of men. It is not discredited by their opposition; but a *primâ facie* point in its favor is that they do not receive it. And, certainly, had the claims of Jesus been accepted by these dried-up formal traditionalists we should have had some cause for doubt.

Abandoning the figure used in the parable, our Lord makes use of a new figure to complete the warning. He speaks of two possible contingencies—"Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken"—this had been declared by Isaiah—"but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder," this figure had been familiarized by

Daniel's use of it. The stone which lies ready hewn and suitable for the best part of a building may inflict severe injury on the builder, either by his carelessly stumbling upon it, falling from a height upon it, and so getting himself bruised and broken; or it may fall from a height upon him, in which case it is certain death.

The first case is that in which Christ is a stone of stumbling to those to whom He is presented. God lays this stone everywhere in our way that we may build upon it or set it high in the place of honor, and we cannot simply walk on as if God had done no such thing. Whatever else Christ is, He is substantial, a reality as solid as the stone against which your foot is jarred. To make as if He were not, and to pass on untouched and unchanged, is impossible. If we attempt to do so, ignoring that the stone is there, we stumble and fall and injure ourselves. The foundation stone becomes a stone of offense. Every one who hears the gospel, every one in whose path Christ is laid, is either the better or the worse for it. The gospel once heard is "henceforward a perpetual element in the whole condition, character, and destiny of the hearer." No man who has heard can be as if he had not. Though he may wish to pass on as if he had not seen Christ at all, he is not the same man as he was before, his spiritual condition is altered, possibilities have dawned upon his mind, openings into regions which are

new and otherwise inaccessible, he is haunted by unsettled perplexities, doubts, anxieties, thoughts.

This attitude of mind must have been very common in Christ's own time, many persons must have shrunk from the responsibility of determining for themselves what they ought to think of Him. Many now do the same. They wish to overlook Him and pass on into life as if He were not in their path. But how foolish if He be the one foundation on whom a life can safely be built. Men do not think of sin as a permanent foundation—they only think of it as a temporary expedient—practises get into a man's life which he does not like to think of as permanent, but only as serving present turns. They do not deliberately choose anything as permanently satisfactory, cannot bring their minds to the idea of being built *in* and settled finally, even though they have some consciousness that it were wise to be so. Those who thus overlook Christ and try to pass on into life as if He were not, damage their own character, because they know He is there, and until they make up their minds about Him, life is a mere make-believe. It is thus they are bruised on this stone of stumbling. They are practising upon themselves, and are not true to their own convictions. They do not walk steadily and uprightly as those whose path is ascertained and assured, but they stumble as those who are still tripped up and held back by something they have

not taken account of. Just as a person who feels he has forgotten something, cannot give his mind fully to what is before him, but is held back by the unconscious effort to remember, so here the spirit that has yet to take account of Christ and decide regarding Him is held back and distracted. Besides, this unwillingness to face facts fairly, this desire to do for a time without Christ, and as if He were not in our path, is apt to produce a habitual falseness in the spirit. You may be unconscious of any such process, but many processes go on in us quite as effectually without as with our intention. Those which are fatal to the body do so. Each refusal to determine regarding Christ makes your conscience blunter, your heart less open to righteous and reasonable influence. It may be by a very little, yet it does. The frost of a minute, or of thirty minutes, may be imperceptible in its result, or it may only draw a few pretty lines upon the water, but it is frost all the same, and is gradually forming a strength of surface which no hammer can break, nor any fire melt. By trying, then, to get past Christ and make a life for yourself without Him, by trying to build on some other foundation, you are both trying to do what everything is arranged to defeat, and you are injuring your own character, not yielding to the influences that you feel to be good, nor listening to convictions which you shrewdly suspect to be reasonable.



This bruised condition, however, is remediable. The second action of the stone on the builder is described as final. The stone, which is of sufficient massiveness to uphold a world, falls upon the unhappy opposer, and the living, hopeful man lies an undistinguishable mass. At once slain and buried, those who determinedly opposed Christ lie oppressed by that which might have been their joy. Their dwelling and refuge becomes their tomb. Every excellence of Christ they have leagued against themselves. It is their everlasting shame that they were ashamed of Him. The faithfulness, truth, and love of Christ, that is to say, the qualities whose existence is all that any saved man ever had to depend upon, the qualities in the knowledge and faith of which the weakest and most heartless sinner sets out boldly and hopefully to eternity, these all now torment with crushing remorse those who have despised them. Do not suppose this is an extravagant figure used by our Lord to awe His enemies, and that no man will ever suffer a doom which can be fairly represented in these terms. It is a statement of fact. Things are to move on eternally in fulfilment of the will of Christ. He is identified with all that is righteous, all that is wise, all that is ultimately successful. To oppose His course, to endeavor to defeat His object, to attempt to work out an eternal success apart from Him is as idle as to seek to stop the earth in its course, or to stand in

the path of a stone avalanche in order to stem it. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom—He has become the Head of our race, that in Him we may together be led on to everlasting prosperity and righteousness.

The whole forward movement of individuals and of the race must be made on the lines laid down by Christ, and the time is coming when this shall be so plainly manifested that all who have not His spirit shall feel that all power has left them, and shall see the whole stream of life and progress flow past them, leaving them stranded and wrecked and useless. For a long time it may be doubtful in a country and in national affairs whether progress and prosperity are bound up with one party or another, with one spirit in trade and in government or with another, and men take their sides and adopt their several causes according to their tastes and judgment; but a day comes when the one party is put to confusion, and when it is entirely left behind by the current of events. So is it here, but in a far more momentous sense. It is not only national affairs that are governed and guided by certain deep laws that the craftiest statesman has no power whatever to alter; but the affairs of the individual, of each one of us, and of all men together, similarly move onwards according to certain immutable moral laws. These are revealed to us in Christ, that we may know and appropriate them. For,

just in proportion as we do so, and attach ourselves to Him, and feel the power and beauty of His way and of His spirit, shall we ourselves stand with Him when all opposition has slunk away ashamed, and enter with Him on the great future which will open to those who are capable of taking a part in it. What, then, you feel it in you to do by God's grace in the way of bending your will to what is right, of subduing the evil in you which you see can but lead to death and disturbance, these things do, hoping in Him who has promised to return and reign eternally.

## THE MARRIAGE OF THE KING'S SON.

MATT. xxi. 45—xxii. 14.

THIS parable is spoken to the same mixed crowd as the parable of the Two Sons and the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen. Sorely hit by the two former parables, the chief priests and Pharisees would fain have put a stop to this kind of teaching, but they feared the people. Public opinion here, as often elsewhere, was healthier than the opinion of the clique which had the official guidance of ecclesiastical and theological affairs. Public opinion was too markedly in favor of Jesus just at this time for the Pharisees to ignore or brave it. They felt they must take it into account, and either wait for a turn in the tide, or compass their end by craft, and secretly. While they hesitate and stand measuring the heartiness of the crowd in Jesus' favor, and considering how far they may venture, this third parable is launched against them.

The object of it is still the same—to set in a vivid light the guilt of the Jewish leaders in rejecting Christ, and the punishment which in consequence was to fall upon them; but to this third parable an appendix is added, which is even more

striking than the parable itself—an appendix spoken, as we shall see, rather for the sake of the crowd than as a warning to the Pharisees.

Already in His parables our Lord had compared the kingdom of God to a feast, for the sake of illustrating the rude, discourteous, and mistaken way in which men deal with God's invitations. There are occasions on which men combine to be happy, meet for the understood purpose of enjoyment, so that anything which interrupts or represses the hilarity of the company is frowned upon as out of place and inopportune. Matters of great importance are postponed, questions requiring much gravity in their discussion are avoided, anything that might irritate or slightly annoy or discompose any single guest is excluded, and, in short, everything is arranged to admit of free, unrestrained mirth. And when such occasions are public, he who refuses to join in the national festivity is looked upon as a traitor, and he who has private griefs is expected to keep them in abeyance, "to anoint his head and wash his face that he appear not unto men to fast." Disloyalty could scarcely assume a more marked form than if a man being invited to share the festal joy of his king on some such worthy occasion as that here adduced, were either to refuse the invitation, or, accepting it, were to conduct himself with so sullen and rude a demeanor as to show that his feelings were quite out of harmony

with his host's. Such a man would be at once recognized as disaffected and a rebel, and also as a rebel who had chosen a singularly unfortunate and discourteous mode of exhibiting his rebellion.

But the speciality of this parable is that the feast to which the king invites His subjects is a marriage feast. Prominence is given to the circumstance that the host is a king, and that the occasion of the feast is the marriage of His Son.

It is obvious how this figure was suggested to the mind of Christ. Long before His time the relation between husband and wife had been used to exhibit the devotedness and fidelity with which God gives Himself to men, as well as the intimacy and loving care to which He admits them. And the close alliance between God and men which was thus expressed, was actually consummated in the person of Jesus Christ. His assumption of humanity into perfect union with His own Divine nature was the actual marriage of God and man. In Him God and man are made one—so truly and perfectly one, that whereas formerly marriage was used to illustrate this union, now this union stands as the ideal to which marriage may aspire, but which it can never reach. It is a union which has the characteristics of marriage. It is the result of love and choice, not of nature; and it implies that the stronger

party assume the responsibilities and watch over the interests of the weaker. The marriage is formed that the stronger party may have fuller opportunity to help and serve the weaker. God then might reasonably expect that men should, at least on this occasion, recognize that God and they constituted one kingdom and cause. Well might He expect that now, at least, they should rejoice with Him. It is their nature that is seated on the throne, their rights that are thus secured, their prosperity that is thus guaranteed. And yet, though proclamation had been made of the coming festivities, though due invitation had been given, and though, finally, John had been sent to say that now all things were ready and to herald the bridegroom in visible form through their streets, the people had listened with dead indifference, as if it had been a kingdom in the moon that was spoken of, and as if God had wholly mistaken in supposing that such an event had any bearing at all on them or their interests.

This union of God and man that is as natural as love, and as supernatural as God—this union, consummated in Christ, is the foundation of our hope. Apart from this we may find some little help in the hour of temptation, some faint glimmering of hope in the time of trouble, but nothing that can quite satisfy and bring to us a perfect light—nothing that can give us God, the Highest of all, the Eternal, the Almighty, the unfailing

Love and Life. Jesus Christ blesses mankind not by His superior moral teaching mainly, nor only by His giving us a clearer knowledge of God than other teachers have done, but by His bringing God into human life, by showing us our God suffering with and for us, by bringing God to work among us and in our place, and thus to lift humanity, by a power Divine, to its highest level. It is by bringing thus a new thing into the world, the fulness of God into human life, that He has done that which no one but He could do, and which merits the gratitude of every man. He has thus become the true Bridegroom of men, the joy and help of us all. That was a memorable expression of Napoleon's when he said, "Jesus Christ has succeeded in making of every human soul an appendage to His own." He has made Himself the indispensable person to us all—the indispensable "fellow-worker with each man in the realization of his supreme destiny."

The earnest sincerity of God in seeking our good in this matter is illustrated in the parable by one or two unmistakable traits—first, by the king's willing observance of every form of courtesy. Among ourselves there are certain forms, an etiquette, which a host who is anxious to please his guests is careful to conform to. There are ways of putting an invitation which make it almost impossible even for the reluctant to withhold acceptance. In the East one of these forms



is the sending of a second messenger to announce the actual readiness of the feast. In countries where no memoranda are written, and where no fixed hours are observed or appointed, such a final and second invitation is almost necessary; or, if not necessary, does at least pleasantly display the cordiality of the host. To this form God condescended. He not only sent invitations by the prophets, bidding the Jews expect this festivity, but when it was ready He sent John to remind them and to bring them. So it is always. Because God is so true in His purpose to bless you, therefore is He most careful of all your feelings, picking each smallest stone out of your path that might cause you to stumble and take offense, leaving the reluctant without apology. God does not invite you to what has no existence, nor to what is not worth going so far to get, nor on terms it is impossible to fulfil, nor in such a manner that no man who respects himself can accept it. On the contrary, what God offers you is that in which He Himself rejoices. He offers you fellowship with His own Son, He offers you righteousness and love, and He offers this to you with the observance of every form that could prove consideration of your feelings, and in a way which involves that every one who really wishes to be blessed will receive all the help he requires in striving to be so. Another proof of the earnestness of God in His invitation is His wrath against

the murderers who had refused it. You are not much offended at one who refuses an invitation you have given in jest, or for form's sake, half hoping it would not be accepted. God is angry because you have treated in jest and made light of what has been most earnest to Him ; because you have crossed Him in the sincerest purpose to bless you ; because after He has at the greatest expense, not only of wealth and exertion, but of life, provided what He knows you need, you act towards Him as if He had done nothing that deserves the least consideration. This acceptance or rejection of God's offers that we come and talk over, often as if the whole matter were in our hands and we might deal with it as we arrange for a journey or an evening's amusement, is to God the most earnest matter. If God is in earnest about anything, it is about this ; if the whole force of His nature concentrates on any one matter it is on this ; if anywhere the amplitude and intensity of Divine earnestness, to which the most impassioned human earnestness is as the idle vacant sighing of the summer air, if these are anywhere in action, it is the tenderness and sincerity with which He invites you to Himself. There may be nothing so trivial as to be powerless to turn you from God's message, but nothing is so important as to turn Him from seeing how you receive it. You may think His invitation the least interesting of all subjects, you

may in point of fact scarcely ever seriously consider whether it is to be accepted or not, whether it is an invitation, whether you might act upon it, and why you do not—the whole matter of God's offer to you may be unreal, but your answer is matter of God's consideration, and nothing can so occupy Him as to turn His observation from you. No glad tidings from any other part of His government can so fill His ear as to drown your sullen refusal of His grace. To save sinners from destruction is His grand purpose, and success in other parts of His government does not repay Him for failure here. And to make light of such an earnestness as this, an earnestness so wise, so called for, so loving, pure, and long suffering, so Divine, is terrible indeed. To *have been* the object of such earnest love, to have had all the Divine attributes and resources set in motion to secure my eternal bliss, and to know myself capable of making light (making light!) of such earnestness as this, this surely is to be in the most forlorn and abject condition that any creature can reach.

The last scene in this parable comes upon us unexpectedly, and forms indeed an appendix introducing a new lesson, and directed to a special section in the audience. No doubt our Lord perceived that parables such as He had been uttering were open to misconstruction. Ill-living and godless persons, coarse, covetous, and malicious men

might be led to fancy that it mattered very little how they had lived, or what they were. They saw that the gates of the kingdom were thrown open, that all indiscriminately were invited to enter, that God made no distinction, saying to one, "I cannot forget your former neglect," to another, "I do not wish your presence," to a third, "You are too far gone in sin, I do not invite you." It had been made quite clear to them by these parables that they themselves were as free to enter the kingdom as those religious men they had been accustomed to consider so much more in God's favor than they were. This perception of the absolute unconditioned freedom of entrance, this sense borne in upon their mind that they were the objects of God's love and invitation, might possibly lead them to overlook the great moral change requisite in all who enter God's presence and propose to hold intercourse with Him. It is to disabuse them of the idea that the acceptance of God's invitation entails no alteration in their habits and spirit, that this appendix is added.

This object is gained by setting before them an instance in which one who accepted the invitation was convicted of a contempt of the host even greater than that which was involved in rejecting his invitation. He entered the banqueting hall without a wedding garment, appeared at the King's table in just the dress in which he had

been found in the streets by the servants. But had he any means of obtaining a dress more in keeping with the occasion? Was he not perhaps a man so poor that he could afford no preparation of any kind? Had this been so, it would have been pleaded in excuse. But no doubt the parable supposes that the not unusual custom of providing for the guests the needed garment had been adopted; a provision which this guest had despised and refused; he had pushed past the officious servants who would have clothed him. It is this that constituted the man's audacity and guilt. Similar audacity in entering the king's presence without putting on the robe sent by the king for that purpose, has been known to cost a prime minister his life. A traveler who was invited, with the ambassadors he accompanied, to the table of the Persian king, says:—"We were told by the officer that we, according to their usage, must hang the splendid vests that were sent us from the king over our dresses, and so appear in his presence. The ambassadors at first refused, but the officer urged it so earnestly, alleging, as also did others, that the omission would greatly displease the king, since all other envoys observed such a custom, that at last they consented, and hanged, as did we also, the splendid vests over their shoulders." So at this marriage, dresses had been provided by the king. The guests who had been picked off the streets were not told to go

home and do the best they could for their dress, but in the palace, in the vestibule of the banquet-hall each man was arrayed in the dress the king wished to see worn.—Possibly this man who declined the offered garment had a dress of his own he grudged to cover. Possibly he thought he was as well dressed as need be. He would stroll in superciliously as a patron or spectator, thinking it very fit for those poor, coarse-clothed and dirty people to make use of the king's wardrobe, but conscious of no speck nor uncleanness in his own raiment that should cause him to make any alteration of it.

Neither is this a formal and artificial custom representing a formal and artificial method of judging men. In point of fact this rejection of the marriage-dress is proof of alienation of spirit, disaffection, want of sympathy with the feelings of the king. The man who could refuse the festive dress on such an occasion must lack the festive spirit, and is therefore a "spot in the feast." It is a real and internal, not a merely formal and external distinction that exists between him and the rest of the guests. He sits there out of harmony with the spirit of the occasion, despising the exultation and mirth of his neighbors, and disloyal to his king. Therefore is his punishment swift and severe. The eye of the king that travels round the tables and carries welcome and hearty recognition, gladdening all his loyal sub-

jects, is suddenly arrested upon this unseemly, audacious, unjustifiable intruder. As every guest turns to see the cause of the changed expression in the face that lights up the whole feast, there with head that would, but cannot, hang, with horror-stricken eye riveted upon the face of the king, stands the despiser of the wedding-garment—speechless—all his guilt and easy confidence gone, fearful misgivings sliding into his heart, quailing and fainting beneath that just and pitiful eye that empties him of all self-deceit, of all self-confidence, of all untruth. He welcomes the attendants who hurry him from the gaze of the assembled guests and the brilliant lights of the hall; but not the outer darkness of an Eastern street, not the pitchy blackness in which he lies unseen and helpless, can hide him from that gaze of His Lord which he feels to be imprinted on his conscience for evermore. It is that which pursues him, that which makes him outcast from all consolation and all hope, that he has alienated his Lord, has been branded by his king, has forfeited the approval and favor of Him whose recognition and fellowship carry with them all joy, and hope, and blessing.

Does this man's conduct signify anything to ourselves? Does his doom cover any great truth that concerns ourselves? How idle it seems to ask the question. Is there any commoner way of dealing with God's invitation than that which

this man adopted? He had no deep love for his king, no grateful and humbling sense of his kindness, no perception of what was due to him, but with the blundering stupidity of godlessness, thought selfishness would carry him through, and ran right upon his doom. What is commoner than this self-complacency, this utter blindness to the fact that God is holy, and that holiness must therefore be the rule everywhere; what is commoner than the feeling that we are well enough, that we shall somehow pass muster, that as we mean to take our places among the heavenly guests we shall surely not be ejected? How hard it is for any of us fully to grasp the radical nature of the inward change that is required if we are to be meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. Conformity to God, ability to rejoice with God and in God, humble and devoted reverence, a real willingness to do honor to the King's Son, these are great attainments; but these constitute our wedding-garment, without which we cannot remain in His presence nor abide His searching gaze. It will come to be a matter between each one of you singly and Him, and it is the heart you bear towards Him that will determine your destiny. No mere appearance of accepting His invitation, no associating of yourself with those who love Him, no outward entrance into His presence, no making use of the right language is anything to the purpose. What is wanted is a pro-



found sympathy with God, a real delight in what is holy, a radical acceptance of His will,—in other words, and as the most untutored conscience might see, what is wanted is a state of mind in you which God can delight in, and approve of, and hold fellowship with. To His table, to His everlasting company, to Himself and His love He invites you, and in order to accept this, the only invitation He gives (for there are no degrees, no outer and inner circles, no servants made of those who will not be friends)—in order to accept this invitation, or in the acceptance of it, acceptance of God, of His spirit, character, and ways is necessary. There is no real acceptance of the invitation, no abiding entrance into God's favor where there is no growing likeness to God; without this it is mere word and self-deception. "Know ye not that the unjust shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners shall inherit the kingdom of God."

For "many are called, but few chosen." To all of us the invitation comes; there is no man whom God does not desire to see enjoying His bounty. There is no question about the invitation—you have it—good and bad alike are invited, and yet even among those who seem to accept it, there is sometimes lacking that which can alone

give them a permanent place in His presence and favor. There is no real sympathy with God, no pleasure in those matters which He deems important, no similarity of spirit—in a word, no real goodness. This is a state of spirit which will one day develop into a *consciousness* that we have nothing in common with God.

But, in conclusion, there is abundant encouragement in this parable to all who are willing and desirous to put on the Lord Jesus. As the poor people picked up by the servants of the king would have felt very awkward about their dress, and could not in decency have accepted the invitation had they not been assured that a suitable dress would be given them; so should we feel very awkward indeed, if, when summoned into God's presence, there should remain in us anything to make us feel out of place, uneasy, fearful. But the invitation itself guarantees the provision of all that follows it. It is the first business of every host to make his guest feel at home, and therefore does God provide us not only with great outward blessings, but with all that can make us feel easy and glad in His presence. Fellowship with Him is indeed reverential, for He is our King: but being our Father there will be in it also more of the exuberant delight of a family gathering than of the stiffness of a formal state banquet throughout which we long for the termination, or are hindered from all enjoy-

ment through fear of doing something out of place.

Though, therefore, there are many called but few chosen, there is no reason why you should not be among the few. For God not only offers enjoyment, but also power to enjoy. If you could not be easy in God's presence without great alterations in your character, these alterations will be made. The *bona fide* invitation is your guarantee that they will be made. If you could not be easy in God's presence without knowing that He was fully aware of all you had thought and done against Him, and forgave it you; if you could not eat at the table of one against whom you harbored ill-will; if you could not enjoy anything in company thoroughly uncongenial, whose conversation was all of subjects quite uninteresting to you; if you are conscious that in order to enjoy any entertainment the prime requisite is that you have a genuine admiration and love for the host—then this will all be communicated to you on your acceptance of God's invitation. Do you always feel that God's holiness is too high and distant for fellowship? But consider how Christ drew men and women to Him. No one ever created such a passion of devoted love as He. Consider Him and you will at length learn to think more wisely of holiness. Are you conscious that your habitual leanings and likings are earthly, that as yet you are more at home in other com-

panies than in God's? Does your unfitness even more than your unworthiness deter you—does your want of ability to find your joy in God alarm you more than your guilt? Still you see here that God invites you as you are, and those whom He casts out are only those who have so fond a confidence in themselves as to think they are fit enough for His presence as they stand.

## THE TEN VIRGINS.

MATT. XXV. 1-13.

THE prolonged discourse of which this parable forms a striking part was uttered in reply to a very natural question which the disciples had put to our Lord. In ignorance of what was chiefly engaging His thoughts, and in simple-minded, rustic admiration of the metropolis, they had been taking Him round to show Him the marvels of the now completed temple. And well might they expect to hear their own exclamations of surprise and overwhelming admiration echoed from every one who in their day "walked about Zion" and marked her bulwarks, or gazed on the astounding pile of marble that crowned the opposite summit of Moriah. Buildings of similar magnificence were scarcely elsewhere to be seen. It can scarcely have been with cold contempt for those stupendous architectural works, but rather with deep sorrow and compassion that our Lord, after silently gazing upon them, or entering with sympathy into the enthusiasm of his companions, at last let fall the unexpected word, "Verily I say unto you there shall not be left here one

stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." It was inevitable that the disciples should eagerly desire to know when this catastrophe was to occur. "Tell us when shall these things be, and what shall be the sign of Thy coming and of the end of the world."

Our Lord's reply to this question is, that the day and the hour of His coming are known to the Father only, and that therefore the only way to be prepared for that hour is to be always ready, prepared for any hour and every hour. This is the lesson which He means the parable to convey, and which He expressly draws in the words, "Watch, therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of man cometh." And we must beware of pressing this or any parable to say more than it was meant to say. We get what it was intended to give when by its vivid imagery we are practically aroused to the necessity of being always prepared for our Lord's coming. We may therefore dismiss a great deal of minute allegorizing and searching for hidden meanings in little turns of expression and parabolic accessories with the words of one of the Reformers who says, "It is nothing at all to the purpose to speculate and refine about virginity and lamps and oil and those who sell oil. These refined speculations are the trifles of allegorizers. But the one idea that is of moment is, that they who are really prepared shall enter into the joy

of the Lord, while the unprepared shall be excluded." Or we may say with Calvin himself:—"Some expositors torment themselves greatly in explaining the *lamps*, and the *vessels*, and the *oil*; but the simple and genuine meaning of the whole is just this, that it is not enough to have a lively zeal for a while. We must have in addition a perseverance that never tires."

Neither need we spend time on the customs from which the parable draws its imagery. Let it suffice to read the words of one of the most accurate describers of what is to be seen in India. "At a marriage," he says, "the procession of which I saw some years ago, the bridegroom came from a distance, and the bride lived at Serampore, to which place the bridegroom was to come by water. After waiting two or three hours, at length, near midnight, it was announced, as if in the very words of Scripture, "Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him." All the persons employed now lighted their lamps, and ran with them in their hands to fill up their stations in the procession. Some of them had lost their lights, and were unprepared; but it was then too late to seek them, and the cavalcade moved forward to the house of the bride, at which place the company entered a large and splendidly illuminated area before the house covered with an awning, where a great multitude of friends, dressed in their best apparel, were seated upon mats.

The bridegroom was carried in the arms of a friend, and placed upon a superb seat in the midst of the company, where he sat a short time, and then went into the house, the door of which was immediately shut, and guarded by sepoy's. I and others expostulated with the doorkeepers, but in vain. Never was I so struck with our Lord's beautiful parable as at this moment : *and the door was shut.*"

This imagery so familiar to our Lord's hearers was used on this occasion to illustrate chiefly these three things: the meaning of our Lord's command to watch; its reason; and the means of fulfilling it. It illustrates the *meaning* of the command; showing us that it does not mean, "Be ye always on the watch," but "Be always prepared." The fisherman's wife who spends her time on the pier-head watching for the boats, cannot be so well prepared to give her husband a comfortable reception as the woman who is busy about her household work, and only now and again turns a longing look seaward. None of the virgins were on the watch for the bridegroom, but some of them were nevertheless prepared for His coming. It is impossible for us to be always looking out for the coming of Christ, but it is quite possible to be prepared for His coming. Our life is to bear evidence that one of the things we take into account is the approach of our Lord.



2. It illustrates also the *reason* of the command. No one can tell when this second great interruption of the world's even course is to take place. It may be nearer than some expect; or as the parable shows, it may be more distant than some expect. The expectation of a speedy termination of things which so largely prevailed in the first Christian generation might have been moderated by the wide circulation of this parable. The virgins who neglected to carry reserve-flasks of oil were those who expected the bridegroom would soon appear. They did not anticipate a long delay; they made no provision for continuance. Had the hour been a fixed one they would have been prepared, but they were betrayed by its uncertainty. And no doubt if any one could say with authority, "The Lord is to come on Tuesday first," a very large number of persons would at once prepare as best they could to meet Him. If the belief really grew up within them that on a certain day not far distant they must face their Lord, that belief would certainly produce a multitude of thoughts, and some efforts at preparation. It is, then, after all, your baseless supposition that the Lord will not come quickly that betrays you into carelessness. This parable assures you you have no ground for saying, "My Lord delayeth His coming." You really do not know how near He is.

And if any one feels, "Well, this then comes

to no more than an appeal to fear. The appeal made by the parable is grounded on the assumption that Christians will be better men, and do more if they expect to be quickly summoned into Christ's presence,"—if this be felt, it can only be said in reply that fear is in many circumstances the equivalent of prudence, and a very wholesome motive; and further, that the expectation of Christ's coming does not give rise only to fear, but also to hope; that it braces the Christian's energies, and in accordance with human nature quickens the spiritual life. Or if any one feels that to have stimulated all past generations with the expectation of an event which did not after all occur, is artificial and unworthy, it should be enough to reflect that the beneficial system of insurance proceeds on principles to a large extent similar.

3. The parable shows us *how* we are to prepare for meeting the Lord. We are to be prepared to join in the festal celebration of His coming. We are to be in a position to join with those who add luster to His presence, who give Him a hearty welcome, and who enter with Him into His joy. We are prepared for His coming if we are in the spirit of the occasion, and if we are furnished with what may fit us for suitably appearing in His company. The lamps of the virgins were meant to lend brilliancy to the scene; they were intended as a festal illumination. The virgins whose lamps burned brightly were not ashamed to be seen

forming part of the bridal company. They were in keeping with it. Conscience will tell us what numbers us among the wise or among the foolish. Everything in us that heartily welcomes Christ's presence, and heartily rises to do Him honor ; everything about us that can reflect any brightness or glory on Him ; everything that makes us better than blots and blacknesses in His retinue ; everything that will seem a suitable accompaniment in the triumph of a holy Redeemer, is a preparation for Christ's coming.

⤵ The parable is not addressed to those who have never made any preparation for Christ's coming, but to those who have not made sufficient preparation. ⤴ It reminds us that all who may at one time show similar preparedness for Christ's presence do not in the end show the same. Of those who start with similar intentions and similar external appearance a number fail to fulfil their original intention, and in the end belie their promising appearance. It is the same everywhere : in severe marches, prolonged and fatiguing enterprises and labors, a number always tail off and are not forthcoming at the final muster. The number who at any period of their life really go forth to meet their Lord, delighting to do Him honor and seeking His presence, may not be very large ; but it is much larger than the number who maintain their preparedness to the end. The reason of this so frequent failure is here declared. The folly

of the foolish virgins consisted in this, that while the wise took oil, they took none: that is to say, made no provision against any delay in the time of the Bridegroom's appearance. They lit their lamps, but made no provision for feeding them: the flame was to all appearance satisfactory, but the source of it was defective. And without running the figure too hard, we may say that those who in the end of their life fail to show as much fitness for Christ's presence as they did at some previous period, fail because they have been all along superficial and have never been filled with grace at the source, have not had the root of the matter in them.

The foolish virgins, then, are a warning to all who are tempted to make conversion everything, edification nothing; who cultivate religion for a season and then think they have done enough; who were religious once, can remember the time when they had very serious thoughts, and very solemn resolutions, but who have made no earnest effort, and are making none, to maintain within themselves the life they once began. The wise are those who recognize that they must have within them that which shall enable them to endure to the end—not only impressions, right impulses, tender feelings, but ineradicable beliefs and principles which will at all times produce all right impulse and feeling. It is not in vain that our nature is made as it is made. In body and soul

things are so ordered that one part aids and feeds another part. Without a good digestion no other function can be thoroughly well performed ; as well performed as it might be. And in our spiritual nature, our feelings and impulses are nourished by our beliefs and perceptions. If we recognize the truth, if we have come to an assured and settled conviction that Christ has lived, and that He now lives, if our perceptions and beliefs are bringing us in contact with the truth, with Christ, and with things unseen, then we may expect to continue to the end.

Another point may be accepted from this part of the Parable: that there must be regard paid both to the outward and inward life. The vessel of oil is not enough without the burning lamp ; nor the lamp merely lighted and with no supply of oil. There is a something which makes you worthy of entering with Christ into lasting joy. And this something is not an exhibition of the external marks of a Christian, neither is it the certainly that once you had inward grace ; but it is the continuous maintenance, to the end, both of the outward works which manifest, and of the inward graces which are the life of a Christian. The inward life of the soul and the outward expression of that life bear to one another an essential relation. On the one hand, if you do not constantly renew your supply of grace, if you do not carefully see to the condition of your own

spirit, your good works will soon become less frequent, less sincere, and less lovely: your flame will burn low. But, on the other hand, if you tend only the life of your own soul, if you seek only to possess as much grace as possible for yourself, if you ask for the Holy Spirit and yet do none of those things in which the Spirit would naturally express Himself, if you do not let your light shine before and upon men in the actual circumstances you are placed in, then you will soon find that your internal life begins to stagnate and corrupt.

To a healthy Christian life these two things are essential. A vessel of oil is, in itself, of no use on a dark night. The oil is not light, and might as well be water unless a light be added. And a burning wick which lasts only for half a minute, is only disappointing and tantalizing. A Christian must not only feel right but do right; and must not only do right but feel right. To be filled with the Spirit you have but to pray. You cannot manufacture nor create that which can sustain your spiritual life: God only can give it, and give it He does, gladly and liberally, in answer to your requests. And having the Spirit you must use Him; letting your light shine not so as to show yourself more conspicuously, but so as to help on others in their dark and doubtful way through this life; by dealing fairly with them, by being generous and considerate, by

doing the best you can for every one you have to do with in any capacity.

This is the reason why many of us feel slightly jarred in spirit when we hear converts rising in a confession-meeting one after another and saying, "I was saved last Wednesday night," "I was saved on the 18th February," "I was saved on the 12th March," and so on. It is not that we do not believe that they are speaking the truth, but that we know that they have yet to be tested by life. We rejoice with them because they have found their Saviour; we tremble for them because we know that they have yet to work out their own salvation through years of temptation. All that their confession means is, that their lamp is lit, but how long it will burn is quite another question. They are merely in the condition of the ten virgins as they first went out, and only time can show whether they have oil or not. They may have been able to rejoice in Christ at a given hour last week or last month, and may at that hour have risen to greet Him, and there is nothing wrong in their declaring that such has been the case: but their trial has yet to take place; it has yet to be discovered whether, when many years have passed, they shall still be found rejoicing in Him. For in many cases it would appear as if conversion and salvation were looked upon as equivalents: in many cases there is a lack of soberminded counting of the cost, and a

jubilation of spirit which would be more becoming at the close of the long fight of faith than at its commencement. You may say you are saved when you fairly put yourself into Christ's hand ; but you must also remember that then your salvation is only beginning, and that you cannot, in the fullest sense, say you are saved until Christ has wrought in you a perfect conformity to Himself.

This being the distinction between the wise and foolish virgins, that which brings it to light is that the Bridegroom did not come while all the lamps were yet burning, and that during His delay they all slumbered and slept. This seems to mean no more than that all, having made such preparation as they judged sufficient "calmly and securely waited the approach of the Bridegroom." There can scarcely be any more than this meant by the sleep ; nothing which would make the sleep culpable on the part of the wise, for we do not find that any evil consequence whatever followed to them ; rather they would be all the fresher for their rest, the better prepared to enter on the joy. But the security which is excusable, and the repose which is necessary to one condition, is in another utter madness. Unconstrained mirth, eager pursuit of business, is one thing in the man who has just examined his books and made arrangements to meet all claims, but it is quite another thing in him who has made no such



arrangements and does not know whether he can meet his engagements. So it is one thing to turn away your attention from the person and coming of Christ when you have made sure you are prepared to meet Him, and altogether another thing to turn your attention to other things in mere thoughtless security. It is one thing to engage in the business of this life, knowing that though your Lord find you in it, you have what will enable you to meet Him, the graces then required being really in you and ready to show themselves, though not at present called into exercise by the calculation, or the plan, or the work you are engaged in for the hour; but it is wholly another thing to plunge into the world's business without having once considered whether you have given sufficient attention to your preparedness for that event which may interrupt any day's business, or without keeping up a constant examination of the inward life of your spirit.

But we may learn from the slumber of the wise, as well as from the rash sleep of the foolish. There is a kind of sleep in which the sense of hearing, at least, is on the alert, and when by a skilful discrimination unattainable when awake, the sense takes note only of the one sound it waits for, so that the sound of a distant and watched-for foot-step arouses to the keenest wakefulness. If you look on these weary, slumbering virgins, you see the lamps firmly grasped, and when you try to

unclasp the slumbering but faithful fingers, every faculty is at once on the alert. Other noises do not awaken them, but before the cry, "The Bridegroom cometh" has ceased to echo in the porch that shelters them, they stand erect and are trimming their lamps. So should it be with us; whatever necessary occupation, whatever necessary saturation of our minds with the thoughts of this world's property, turns our direct attention from the approach of our Lord, there should still be an openness of sense in His direction, a settled persuasion that it is His voice that must be hearkened to, a predisposedness to attend rather to Him if He should call, an inwrought though latent expectation of His coming, a consciousness, which but a whisper will arouse, that what we are here for is not to slumber, not to do what we might as well or better do anywhere else and with no hope of our Lord's coming, but still to meet Him. Through all the sleep of these virgins, dream would be chasing dream, they would be seeing bridal processions, gorgeous with all the gay and fantastic adornment which the closed eye so clearly sees, hearing sackbut and dulcimer and all kinds of music, and ever and anon starting to hear if the cry, "The Bridegroom cometh" were not real and summoning themselves. So through all the occupations of a Christian in which he is not watching for his Lord and trimming his lamp, there is, or should be, an under-current of expect-

tation, ever keeping him in unconscious preparedness, occasionally roused into actual looking out to see. He is not always gazing forward, but ever and anon sends a messenger from the inmost citadel of his soul to inquire, "Watchman, what of the night?"

While they are thus all slumbering, and when their sleep is deepest, when the fatigue of watching is most felt, when things are stillest, and men count upon a few hours quiet and deliverance from care, "at midnight," the cry is heard, "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh!" And now the difference between the really and apparently prepared is manifested. There is something terrible in the security of the foolish maintained up to the last. They, too, arise and trim their lamps; even though there is nothing but a quenched, foul wick yet they seem to think still that matters are not so bad. They have but to ask oil of their pleasant companions. Not yet are they aware that their fate is already sealed. And this sudden and appalling reversal of their hopes, this mingling at a marriage feast of exultant joy and the most melancholy and calamitous ruin, seems intended to fix in our minds an idea opposite to, and that should extirpate the idle fancy that things somehow will come all right; that there is no real need of all this urgent warning and watching; that in a world governed by a good and loving God, and where things are going on now pretty tolerably

and so very prosaically, there cannot occur those startling, unnatural, desolating events predicted in God's word. It seems so fearful and incredible a thing that a world men take so lightly and joyously should be quietly leading them on to eternal ruin, that men maintain their easy disposition to the last, and cannot believe that out of a life that may be jested or trifled away, consequences so lasting and so awful can possibly flow. Many things are needed to drive this security out of us, and many things are given us for this end. The virgins go out with no thought but of festivity, enjoyment, and happy excitement; five of them, before the night is gone, are found and left in the bitterest sorrow and self-reproach. "They that were ready went in to the marriage, and the door was shut."

In these words one seems to hear the decisive, final doom of the lost. The crash of the heavy dungeon door and the retiring footsteps are not more sickening to the heart of him that is left to die of hunger, than the heavy, sudden closing of this door that shuts in the saved and shuts out the lost. As the feeling of comfort inside the house increases when the storm howls around and shakes it, as if seeking an entrance that it cannot find, so does the misery of those left outside increase when they hear the sound of revelry and mirth, and see the warm lights thrown out on the darkness. They look round despairingly as the

storm begins to rise, as the first moan of the gathering tempest nears and lights upon them, and warns them, as if in pity, of the blasts that follow as if in anger. But once the door is shut no piteous clamor outside can open it. No sense of the awful state of things outside, no willingness now to be within, avails to force it back upon its hinges. Every voice that wails for entrance is still met by the same chilling, hopeless reply, "I know you not." A new thing it is for that door to be shut. So long has it stood open, thrown wide back, that we forget there is a door that can shut that entrance; that it is not more useful now to let in, than one day to keep out. But the time comes when whosoever will shall not be saved; when it will be vain pointing men to the door; when whosoever is outside, there remains. And this time may be before you rise from where you now sit. No man can say it shall not. He who feels it most unfair to be hedged up thus to an hour, to be told it is unsafe and unreasonable to delay even so long, cannot assert that the end is further distant. To-day the door is open, to-morrow it may be too late to seek entrance. The hand that closes it may already be laid upon it.

It is foolishness, not wickedness, that is reprehended in these virgins—that is to say, in those who are represented by them. The wise man is he who shapes his conduct in accordance with the

truth of things and with actual facts; the foolish man is he who shuts his eyes to what he does not wish to see, and fancies that somehow, though he can't tell how, things will go all right with him. He is, in fact, the ostrich who buries his head in the sand and fancies he has escaped because he has shut his eyes to what is hostile. The man who makes no preparation for the future is a foolish man. He may explain it to himself as he pleases, but to attempt an explanation is only to give further proof of his foolishness. He may see his way with perfect clearness a few paces before him, but if he does not see where it is to end, how can he tell whether he ought to go on even these few paces? The man who does not think, who does not consider whether he is prepared for the future or not, who does not seriously measure himself by every standard he can think of, and especially by the inevitable requirements of God and eternity, is a foolish man. He may be clever, brilliant in talk and very entertaining in company, he may be useful in business, he may be well-meaning, but he is foolish—has none of that wisdom which consists in seeing things as they actually are, and in conforming oneself to them. The man who at this present time is in point of fact leaving it to mere chance whether he is to be saved or lost, must surely feel that he is profoundly foolish.

Let us then meet Christ's intention in the par-

able, and see that for our part we are prepared for His coming. Let us make sure that the little flame once kindled is not already burning low. Let us be sure that we are living in constant communication with the source of all spiritual life; that the very spirit of Christ dwells in us richly. Is there one who feels that things are not with him as they ought to be, and that he has declined from the glad preparedness he once enjoyed, or even that he has never attained to a state in which any luster could be thrown by him on the redeeming grace of Christ? To this person Christ speaks the parable. It is you He longs to see providing yourself with the material of everlasting goodness and everlasting joy. There is a Spirit offered you through whom you can become pure and loving, capable of good, at peace with yourself and with God. What response do you make to Christ's offers? Are you to turn away and let it be possible that the next summons you hear may be: "Behold the Bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet Him?"

## THE TALENTS.

MATT. xxv. 14-30.

THIS parable illustrates the great principle which regulates the distribution of rewards and punishments in the kingdom of God—the principle that men shall be judged according to the means at their disposal. The “talents” represent everything over and above natural ability, by which men can advance the interests of the kingdom; position, opportunities, and especially the measure of grace given to each man. All the interests of Christ upon earth are entrusted to His people. He has distributed among us all that He values upon earth. Destroy from earth what men have and enjoy, and all that Christ prizes is gone. There is no interest of His carried forward without human labor; if His servants all cease to work, His cause on earth is at an end. And every servant of His is endowed with means enough to accomplish his own share in Christ’s work. He may not have as much as others. But to be fair, there must be little put in the hands of the servant who can only make use of a little, and much put at the disposal of him who



can manage a large amount. It is as easy—you may say—to make ten talents out of five, as to make four out of two; perhaps easier. Yes, if you choose the right man, but many a man who could make a small business pay, would ruin himself in a big one. Each gets what each can conveniently and effectively handle; and no one is expected to produce results which are quite out of proportion to his ability and his means.

And in order that the judgment may be fair, the reckoning is not made until “after a long time.” We are not called upon to show fruit before autumn. The servants are not summoned to the reckoning while yet embarrassed by the novelty of their position; time is allowed them to consider, to calculate, to wait opportunities, to make experiments. The Lord does not quickly return in a captious spirit, but delays till the wise have had time to lay up great gains, and even the foolish to have learnt wisdom. So with ourselves: we cannot complain if strict account be taken at the end, because we really have time to learn how to serve our Lord. We have time to repair bad beginnings, to take thought, to make up in some degree for lost time. We are not hurried into mistakes and snatched to judgment, as if life were an ordeal we were passing through, where the slightest failure finishes our chances and is relentlessly watched for and insisted upon. We see well enough that with God

it is quite otherwise ; that He wishes us to succeed, will not observe our failures, winks at our shortcomings, and often repairs the ill we have done.

It is not without significance that the servant who did nothing at all for his master, was he who had received but one talent. No doubt those who have great ability are liable to temptations of their own ; they may be more ambitious, and may find it difficult to serve their master with means which they see would bring in to themselves profits of a kind they covet. But such men are at all events not tempted to bury their talent. This is the peculiar temptation of the man who has little ability, and sullenly retires from a service in which he cannot shine and play a conspicuous part. His ambition outruns his ability, and while he envies the position of others, he neglects the duties of his own. Because he cannot do as much as he would, he will not do as much as he can. By showing no interest in that situation in life that God has seen fit he should fill, he would have us believe he is qualified for a higher.

There are many to whom this hint of the parable applies. You are in the same condemnation as this servant when you shrink from exercising your talent ; because it is only one and a small one ; when you refuse to do anything, because you cannot do a great deal ; when you refuse to

help, where you cannot lead ; when you hesitate about aiding in some work, because those with whom you would be associated in it do it better, and show better in the doing of it than yourself ; when you refuse to speak a word in behalf of Christ, because you could not satisfy your own taste, because you could not do it so well as some other person could ; when you refuse to take some position, engage in some duty, be of some use in a certain department in which you would not excel, and would be recognized as surpassed by some others. This miserable fear of being mediocre, how many a good work has it prevented or crippled. If we wait till we are fully qualified to serve Christ, we shall never serve Him at all. If we cannot stoop to learn to do great things by doing very little things, we shall never do great things. The only known way to become a strong and full-grown man is to be first a little child.

It is a true proverb that "the sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men that can render a reason." He can always justify his conduct. The insolence of this man's words is not intentional. He reads off correctly his own state of mind, and fancies that his conduct was appropriate and innocent. It was not his fault that his master was a man who struck terror into the hearts of his servants, and whom it was useless trying to please. And probably this man's account of the reason of his inactivity was accurate.

All wrongness of conduct is at bottom based on a wrong view of God. Nothing so conduces to right action as right thoughts about God. If we think with this servant that God is hard, grudging to give and greedy to get, taking note of all shortcomings, but making no acknowledgment of sincere service, exacting the utmost farthing and making no abatement or allowance—if we one way or other virtually come to think that God never really delights in our efforts after good, and that whatever we attempt in our life He will coldly weigh and scorn, then manifestly we shall have no heart to labor for Him.

But this view of God is unpardonably narrow, and the action flowing from it is after all inconsistent. It is unpardonably wrong, and the very heartiness with which these other servants were greeted refutes it. You hear the hearty "well done" ringing through the whole palace—there is no hesitating scrutiny, no reminding them they had after all merely done what it was their duty to do—not at all—it is the genial, generous outburst of a man who likes to praise and hates to find people at fault; he has been hoping to get a good account of his servants, and it is far more joy in them than gratification in his increased property that prompts this exclamation of surprise and delight and approval. He feels himself much richer in the fidelity of his servants than in their gains. He has pleasure in promoting them, in

bringing them up more nearly to his own rank and person, and in making them thus share in his own plans and arrangements and rule and joy.

Moreover, not only is the view of the master wrong, but the consequent action, as the master points out, is inconsistent. If the master is so slow to recognize sincere effort, so oppressive in his exactions, demanding bricks where he has given no straw, requiring impossible performances, and measuring all work by an impossible standard, is this a reason for making no effort to conciliate him? If you feared that, in the necessary hazard of business, you might lose your lord's talent, yet surely his anger would be as much aroused by inactivity as by unsuccessful efforts to serve him? Why did you not at least put his money into the hands of men who would have found a use for it, and would have paid you a good interest? If you were too timid to use the trust your lord left you, if you knew too little of business and the world's ways to venture on any self-devised investment, there were plenty of substantial genuine undertakings into which you might have put your means. You could work under the guidance of some more masculine nature, who could direct and shelter you.

There are numberless ways in which the most slenderly equipped among us can fulfil the suggestion here given, and put our talent to the exchangers, into the hands of men who can use it.

There is no lack of great works going on for our Lord to which we may safely attach ourselves, and in which our talent is rather used by the leaders of the work, invested for us, than left to our own discretion. Just as in the world there is such an endless variety of work needing to be done, that every one finds his niche, so there is no kind of ability that cannot be made use of in the kingdom of Christ. The parable does not acknowledge any servants who have absolutely nothing; some have little as compared with others, but all have some capacity to forward the interests of the absent master. Is every one of us practically recognizing this—that there is a part of the work he is expected to do? He may seem to himself to have only one talent that is not worth speaking about, but that one talent was given that it might be used, and if it be not used, there will be something lacking when reckoning is made which might and ought to have been forthcoming. Certainly there is something you can do, that is unquestionable; there is something that needs to be done which precisely you can do, something by doing which you will please Him whose pleasure in you will fill your nature with gladness. It is given to you to increase your Lord's goods.

But the law which is exhibited in this parabolic representation is also explicitly announced in the words: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance, but from him

that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." This may be called the law of Spiritual Capital. It is a law with the operation of which we are familiar in nature, and in the commercial world. It is he who has even a little capital to begin with, and who makes a right use of it, who soon leaves far behind the man who has none, or who neglects to invest what he has. And the more this capital grows, the more rapidly and the more easily is it increased. After a certain point, it seems to increase by virtue of its own momentum. So in certain sicknesses, as soon as the crisis of the disease is past and a little health has been funded again in the patient's constitution, this rapidly grows to complete recovery. So with popularity, it begins one scarce knows how; but once begun, the tide flows apace. You may scarcely be able to say why one statesman or one author should be so immeasurably more popular than others; but so it is, that when once a beginning is made, tribute flows in naturally, as waters from all sides settle in a hollow. It is the same with the acquirement of knowledge: the difficulty is to get past a certain point, it is all up-hill till then; but that point once gained, you reach the table lands and high levels of knowledge where you begin to see all round you, and information that has been fragmentary, and therefore useless before, now pieces itself together and rapidly grows to complete attainment. Everything

your hear or see now seems by a law of nature to contribute to the fund you have already acquired. It claims kindred with it, and unites itself to it. "'Tis the taught already that profits by teaching."

It is this same law which regulates our attainment in the service of Christ. However little grace we seem to have to begin with, it is this we must invest, and so nurse it into size and strength. Each time we use the grace we have by responding to the demands made upon it, it returns to us increased. Our capital grows by an inevitable law. The efforts of young or inexperienced Christians to give utterance to the life that is in them may often be awkward, like the movements of most young animals. They may be able to begin only in a very small way, so small a way that sensitive persons are frequently ashamed to begin at all. Having received Christ, they are conscious of new desires and of a new strength; they have a regard for Christ, and were they to assert this regard in the circumstances which call for its assertion, their regard would be deepened. They have a desire to serve Him, and were they to do so in those small matters with which they have daily concern, their desire and ability would be increased. Grace of any kind invested in the actual opportunities of life cannot come back to us as small as it was, but enlarged and strengthened.

Such grace then as we have, such knowledge as



we have of what is due to others, to ourselves, and to God, let us give free expression to. Such investments of Christian principle as are within our reach let us make; such manifestations of a Christian temper and mind as our circumstances daily demand let us exhibit, and it must come to pass that we increase in grace. There is no other way whatever of becoming richly endowed in spirit than by trading with whatever we have to begin with. We cannot leap into a fortune in spiritual things; rich saints cannot bequeath us what their life-long toil has won; they cannot even lend us so that we may begin on borrowed capital. In the spiritual life all must be genuine; we must work our own way upwards, and by humbly and wisely laying out whatever we now possess, make it more or be forever poor.

And yet how few avail themselves of this law, and lay up treasure in heaven. How few make great fortunes in the spiritual life. The mass of Christians never get even fairly started in a career which is at all likely to end in great saintliness of character and serviceableness. They act as if they had no capital of grace to begin with, no fund to trade upon; and they never make any more of it than they made the first week of their profession. They are not traders, every year increasing their stock and enlarging their gains, but they resemble men who receive a weekly wage, which is no more to-day than it was years ago.

Is it not worthy of remark that after years of prayer and of concernment with the fountain of all spiritual life, there should be so small a fund of it laid up within ourselves? Is it not the fact that we seem to be living from hand to mouth, on the verge of bankruptcy, with no more between us and spiritual starvation than the day we believed? Are we conscious that our Christian principle has been deepening year by year? Can we count over our spiritual gains this day, and reckon up solid accumulations of grace in our character? Or are we still merely keeping the wolf from the door, and not always that? Are we making a bare shift to get through without absolutely breaking down? Is it all we can do to make ends meet, and to keep up in our own souls the idea that we are servants of Christ? Do we feel as if they were the thinnest partition between us and great sin? In a word, are we enriched with the "more abundance" of the well-doing servant, and do we find ourselves every way better equipped for all good work; or does even that which we once persuaded ourselves we had seem to be vanishing away?

But the parable reminds us that it is not only the careless who fail to use their talents to advantage, but that the same result sometimes follows from a deliberate but false conception of the service of Christ. As in the world, there are many who prefer comfort to wealth, and have no

ambition to rank as millionaires, so in the Christian life many prefer what they conceive to be security to eminent saintliness. They do not care about greatly increasing the godliness they already have. They would like to have so much grace as would set them on the right hand, not on the left; on the winning and not on the losing side; but they are not concerned to have an abundant entrance if only they get into the kingdom at all. They therefore make no thorough-going effort to keep moving forwards, but rather avoid whatever would effectually commit them to a more devoted and self-sacrificing life. They rather repress the gracious feelings they have than seek to secure for them an increasing expression in their life. They see customs in business which they cannot approve, but they make no remonstrance. They recognize circumstances in which a word of Christian advice might be beneficial, but they do not speak it. They decline to appeal to the highest motives of those around them. They do not pray in their families. They avoid all action which might give them a character for zeal. They seek to live a moderate, decent life. They seek to hit the mean, and to be neither obviously godless nor to be righteous over much. They have some grace, but they do not circulate it and seek to make it more; they have a talent, but they bury it.

Of such a method of dealing with our connec-

tion with Christ, there is only one possible result. The unused talent passes from the servant who would not use it to the man who will. A landlord has two farms lying together: the one is admirably managed, the other is left almost to itself, with the least possible management, and becomes the talk of the whole country-side for poor crops and untidiness. No one asks what the landlord will do when the leases are out. It is a matter of course that he dismisses the careless tenant, and puts his farm into the hands of the skilful and diligent farmer. He enforces the great law: "To him that hath shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken even that he hath."

In the kingdom of Christ this law is self-acting. To bury our talent and so keep it as originally given is an impossibility. To have just so much grace and no more is an impossibility. It must either be circulating and so multiplying, or it ceases to be. It must grow, or it will die. You might as well try to keep your child always a child: he must either grow or die. In the physical world the law has become familiar. The unused muscle dwindles and disappears: no one needs to come and remove it; want of use removes it. The ants whose habits of life enabled them to find food without the aid of sight have gradually lost the organ of sight itself. And so is it in the spiritual world also. The unused faculty becomes

extinct. Hence it is that you see some old persons absolutely callous: the time was when they had at least a capacity for believing in divine things and for choosing God as their portion, but now you would say that the very capacity is destroyed; no Godward emotion can find a place in their heart, nothing can stir a penitent thought in them. Hence it is that in your own souls you perhaps are finding that, no matter what effort you make, you cannot enter as heartily into holy services and occupations as once you did, but are finding your old joy and assurance honey-combed by unbelieving thoughts. Hence it is that the susceptibility to right feeling you had in boyhood has gone from you. You did not mean to become unfeeling, but only shrank from acting as feeling dictated. But he who blows out the flame, finds that the heat and the glow die out of themselves.

The teaching of this side of the parable, then, is alarming in the extreme. The warning it conveys proceeds not from an external voice we can defy or which may be mistaken, but from the laws of our nature; and it speaks not of an arbitrary infliction of punishment, but of results which these laws render inevitable. The unused faculty dies out. The capacities we have for loving and serving God are taken from us. That which was once possible becomes forever impossible. The future once open to us is closed. We are permanently crippled, limited, paralyzed, deadened.

Had we followed the openings given to us, had we used the talent committed to us, endless expansion and fulness of joy would have been ours, but now our chances are past. We have had our opportunity, we have for years been on probation, but now it is over for us. How gladly would a man renounce all that sin has brought him, if only he could stand again with his talent in his hand, and all life's opportunities before him. If there is one truth more than another on which the young may begin to build their life, it is this: that each time you decline a duty to which your better self prompts you, you become less capable of doing it; and on the other hand, that each resistance to temptation, each humble and painful effort after what is good, is real growth in character, growth as real and as permanent as the growth in stature which, once attained, can never again dwindle to the size of the child.

Let us then give ear to the parable, and if we are conscious that even now we are very poor in spiritual things, let us make the most of the grace we have lest we become altogether destitute. If we are now stammering in prayer, the likelihood is we shall soon be dumb, unable to pray. If we are more frequently questioning the reality of God's interference in human affairs, and if we more freely admit doubts regarding cardinal truths, the likelihood is we shall soon disbelieve, and have the very faculty of faith paralyzed so as

to be unable to perceive evidence the most weighty and conclusive. If we are letting go one by one our Christian connections, and involving ourselves more and more with worldly matters, the probability is that shortly we shall be hardened and eager worldlings. We have seen the process going on in many ; why is it not to go on in ourselves? If good works and charitable employments are more a burden to us than they were, let us beware lest we wither and become fit only for the axe and the fire. As the cramped and numbed arm warms and wakens the sleeper, so let this creeping hardness that comes over our spirits awaken us, while yet there is time to chafe the dead limb to life. If yet we can summon into active life one self-denying resolution, if yet we can feel at all the constraining power of Christ's love, and can obey His voice in any one particular, if yet we can prevail upon ourselves to give up worldly and carnal ideas of life, and entertain humble and chastened desires ; then let us most anxiously cherish such feelings, let us fan every good disposition into flame lest it die, let us at once circulate and invest our little remaining capital in the good works we are daily called to, that the very faculty of doing anything for God and our fellow-men may not forever perish out of us.

In closing, it may be well to give special prominence to a truth which has throughout been im-

plied that increased grace is its own reward; or, at any rate, an essential part of it. The servant who had multiplied his talents is rewarded by the possession and use of these multiplied talents. He does not now get the burden of business lifted off his shoulders, and a life of ease appointed to him. This would be to reward the successful officer by depriving him of his command, as if an ample pension would compensate to a martial spirit for the want of active service and fresh opportunities of using richer experience and ampler powers. The talents gained are left in the hands that gained them, and wider opportunities for their use are afforded. This is the reward of the faithful servant of Christ; the grace he has diligently used is increased, and his opportunities continually multiply. He is always entering upon his reward; and entrance into heaven only marks the point at which his Lord expresses His approval, and raises him from a position in which his fidelity is tested to a position of rule, that is, of acknowledged trustworthiness and self-control, the position of one who has acquired an interest in the work, and who so manifestly lives for it that it is impossible any interest of his own should divert him from this. He has no other interest. His joy is his Lord's joy, joy in successfully advancing the best interests of men, joy in the sight of others made righteously happy.

This, then, is the reward Christ offers to us, a



reward consisting mainly in increased ability to serve Him and forward what is good. There can be no reward more certain, for it begins here and now. Your increasing grace is your heaven begun. This is the earnest of the Spirit, the dawning of eternal day. No one need tell you that there is no heaven: the kingdom of heaven is within you. And this reward is also the best you can imagine. All other rewards would be external to yourself and separable from yourself, but this reward is within you, in your own growth in character. Not your condition alone, but you yourself are to be good. What can be better than this? What is the reward the sick man receives for his attention to every prescription of his physician and his avoidance of everything that would throw him back? His reward is that he becomes healthy. What reward has the boy for obedience and diligence and purity? His reward is that he becomes a vigorous and capable man, fit for the ampler enjoyments which the nobler activities of life bring. So says our Lord, "I am come that ye might have life, and that ye might have it more abundantly." If it be asked, what is the great inducement? what is that which makes life worth living? what is that which we can set before us as our sufficient reward and aim? the answer can only be: the inducement is that we have the sure hope of becoming satisfactory persons, of growing up to the stature and energies of per-

fect men, of becoming perfect as our Father is perfect, who needs no reward but delights evermore in being and doing good ; who loves and is therein blessed.

## PARABLE OF THE TWO DEBTORS.

LUKE vii. 36-50.

THE reader of the Gospels cannot fail to remark that the narratives of physical cures are greatly in excess of the narratives of spiritual restorations. Even in cases where spiritual good was received, this comes in sometimes as a mere appendage to the physical healing. Neither can it be thought that the faith required for the cure of the bodily disease itself guarantees the permanent health of the spirit; for there is convincing evidence that not every one who was physically restored was also emancipated from spiritual disorder. In fact, the reader longs for fuller information regarding our Lord's method of dealing with those whose soundness of body enabled them to dispense with appeal to His miraculous power, but who were yet broken in fortune, defeated in life, enthralled by evil habit. This little story presents us with such a case; and it gives us a glimpse of the background of the life of Christ. It was only by accident this woman's case came to the front. There may have been many who, like her, received light and

healing of soul from a few minutes' quiet talk with Christ, and who returned to their occupations unnoticed but renewed. Before she came to Simon's house, this woman had heard Jesus, and had found in Him salvation; but nothing is told us of that part of her history.

In asking Jesus to dine with him, the Pharisee probably acted, as most men on all occasions act, from mixed motives. Others were invited, and gladly, no doubt, availed themselves of the opportunity of meeting Jesus and for themselves determining whether His claim to be a prophet was or was not valid. That the Pharisee felt himself in the position of a superior person who might sit in judgment on this man from Nazareth, is apparent from the circumstance that though he asked Him to his house, he gave Him a barely civil reception, pointing Him to His place without even the formal courtesies which, though small in themselves, greatly facilitate freedom and friendliness of intercourse. A Pharisee, above all men, might have been expected to be punctilious in these matters. But very often those whose manners are formed upon irreproachable models fail grievously in the genial consideration of others which springs from sweetness of nature.

The coldness of the reception given to Jesus by the self-satisfied Pharisee was unexpectedly set in a very strong light by the strikingly oppo-

site conduct of the woman who came into the room where the company was dining. The common Eastern fashion is to sit cross-legged on the floor at meals. But the Jews of our Lord's time had adopted the more luxurious Greek style of reclining on couches round a raised table. Jesus was thus reclining on His left side, with His head towards the table and His feet extended on the couch towards the wall of the room. The intrusion of an uninvited guest during meals would of itself excite no remark. In fact, provision was often made for such intruders by setting cushions round the wall of the room for the accommodation of persons who might wish to talk with the guests either on business or other matters. But that a woman of notoriously bad character, and who could not fail to be known in the little town to all but strangers, should thus enter the dining-room of a Pharisee, was probably an unheard-of presumption. But her whole nature was for the time absorbed in devotion to Jesus, and she could not wait for a quieter time or more convenient place, but passed unheeding through the abuse and repulses of the servants of the house. For her there was but one presence there. She saw no one else; she thought of no one else. Her impulsive temperament, which had possibly led her astray at first, now stands her in good stead, and rebukes our cold and tardy expressions of

gratitude, our cautious and timorous professions of love to Christ.

She enters the room with the intention of anointing the feet of Jesus. But ere she can offer Him this adoration, the fulness of her heart, stirred by His presence, overflows, and in a tumult of penitence, joy, and love she sinks at His feet and bursts into tears. In her confusion, seeking for something to wipe the feet her tears have wet, she uses the hair that is hanging disheveled about her, and her face being thus drawn down and hidden, she covers His feet with kisses. Then remembering her errand, she pours the ointment over them.

That our Lord did not interrupt her is more remarkable than that none of the onlookers did. To any ordinary teacher or benefactor there would have been extreme awkwardness in receiving so extravagant a demonstration of affection and in such circumstances. She kissed His feet. Homage can find no lowlier tribute to pay. Adoration can no farther go. And we cannot but rejoice that for the credit of our common humanity such a tribute was paid to our Lord. There were at least some on earth who recognized that He deserved all they could give. This woman's worship is an exhilarating spectacle. She creates an atmosphere it does one good to breathe, an atmosphere of high and true sentiment, in which things are rightly estimated,

and in which conventionality disappears. Would only that her kissing of the feet of incarnate goodness and love were the representative expression of the feeling of all men towards Christ!

But to the Pharisee the admission of this woman to such liberties was proof that Jesus was no prophet. He himself would have allowed no such unseemly familiarities at the hands of a degraded person; and indeed he might be very easy on that score, for it is not the sanctimoniousness of the Pharisee that elicits such tributes of devotion. Judging Jesus by himself and his class, he did not doubt that He too would have spurned this woman's attentions had He known her character. It was obvious to the Pharisee that Jesus could not know her character, and he therefore concluded He had none of the spiritual insight supposed to characterize the prophet. Jesus penetrates his thought, and makes him sensible that whether or not He had understood the woman's state, He at any rate accurately gauged him. In a conversational, easy way He shows, by the Parable of the Two Debtors, that love is proportioned to indebtedness; and then, applying the Parable, He defends the woman's conduct, and leaves Simon to draw edifying conclusions from his own. The Parable is so put that it is obvious to the entire company that great love means great forgiveness, while meager love means small or doubtful forgiveness. Our Lord then contrasts Simon's

conduct with the woman's; his supercilious violation of the commonest courtesies with her gratuitous attentions; his haughty suspicion with her undoubting and devoted reverence; his self-serving and contemptuous hospitality, his languid and cool civility, which was unequal to the task of filling even the common forms of politeness, with the woman's uncontrollable love that broke through all rules and proprieties of life, and forced new channels for its own vast volume. The facts are obvious to the whole company; the woman's love is unmistakable, Simon's coldness is equally apparent.

What deduction, then, is to be drawn from these facts regarding the spiritual condition of either party? Simon himself has announced the rule for making such a deduction. Great love, he has just said, is the result of great forgiveness. The larger debtor loved his creditor because he forgave him much. This woman, then, has been greatly forgiven; her love is the evidence, the proof of it, according to Simon's own showing. Love, you have told us, varies with indebtedness; this woman's great love means that she is greatly indebted, has been greatly forgiven. The vehemence, or as no doubt you would say, the indecency of this woman's affection, is proof that her many sins are forgiven; that is to say, that she is pure. But—our Lord adds with a significant warning—to whom little is forgiven, the same



loveth little; a hint which might raise in the mind of Simon the question, Am I forgiven at all? If love be the index by which we can read the amount of forgiveness, and if I have barely love enough to show decent respect, what am I to conclude regarding my own debt?

Our Lord's immediate object in this Parable was to defend the woman and justify His own allowance of her presence and expressions of affection. This defense and justification are accomplished when it is shown that the very familiarities which the Pharisee thought Jesus should have rebuked are the proof that the woman is forgiven, cleansed, and pure. Simon had inwardly condemned both the woman and Jesus; the woman for being a sinner, Jesus for admitting her familiarities. By the Parable, Jesus gives him to understand that her love is its own justification. In this reasoning there is involved—first, that love to Christ is love to God, and is therefore the measure of purity; and secondly, that love to Christ is the result of forgiveness.

1. First, Christ points to the woman's demonstrations of *love to Him* as proof that her sins are forgiven. He is the creditor who has forgiven much, and is therefore loved much. In other words, He puts Himself, and allows the woman to put Him, in the place of God; accepting her love for Himself as if it were love to God, and therefore proof that she is forgiven and pure. He does

not appeal to the fact that her heart was filled with love, irrespective of the object of the love ; He does not argue that because she was now possessed by a pure and unselfish affection, she was in a radically sound state of spirit. His argument is, that she has been forgiven a debt, and therefore loves her creditor. It is Christ Himself she loves, and He therefore is the creditor who has forgiven her ; but her debt was sin, transgression against God, and it is therefore God who is her true creditor. Christ thus identifies Himself with God, and in the simplest manner accepts love to Himself as if it were love to God, and as decisive evidence regarding the woman's relation to the Highest.

On another occasion the Pharisees observed what was implied in Christ's forgiving sin, and took exception to His doing so on the valid ground that none can forgive sins but God only. And it may be supposed that on reflection this woman saw what was implied in her connection with Christ. It may be that as yet she had no definite ideas regarding the relation in which Christ stood to God. We do not know how He had got round her heart and quickened within her a craving for purity, and encouraged her to strive after it. But plainly He had enabled her to believe herself forgiven, and had filled her heart with new desires, and to her He was the embodiment of the Divine. All she sought was in Him. And Christ does not warn her, as if this passionate devotion to Him might

arrest a love which should go beyond His person. He allows her to worship Him, to rivet her affections and her hopes upon Him ; He encourages her to think of Him as the forgiver of her sin, as the one to whom it was right to give undivided and unstinted love, as her Lord and her God.

Christ is, in human personality, "the power not ourselves that makes for righteousness." He is God manifest in the flesh. In Him we have all that lifts us to what is best and highest in human nature. In Him we find God ; all that is sufficient to give us confidence, guidance, peace ; to fill our affections and quicken them, to educate conscience and cleanse it, to lift us out of ourselves and give us eternal satisfaction. And Christ links us to Himself by love, and through our love imparts all the blessing He gives. To create an enthusiasm for Himself, a true attachment to His own person, is His chief object. This woman may have had many foolish ideas about God and man, she may have retained much that was faulty, but in that passion of devotion to Himself our Lord saw the beginning of all good in her. Affection for Him deadens every evil passion ; it maintains the soul in an atmosphere of purity ; it assimilates the whole nature to the Divine, and fills the heart with love to men. Love to Christ is, therefore, the measure and the pledge of purity.

2. Secondly, love to Christ is the result of forgiveness, and varies with the amount of debt for-

given. But this statement requires certain modifications. We must not force out of the parable any numerically exact ratio between pardon and love. Jesus does not mean that the one debtor of the Parable was precisely ten times as grateful as the other, although his canceled debt was ten times as great. Manifestly the character of the debtors must be taken into account, and their way of looking at the debt. If they were men of a precisely similar sensitiveness of conscience and quickness of feeling, then their gratitude would be in proportion to their debt. But where do we find two such men? Is it not notorious that while one man is broken-hearted under the shame of bankruptcy, another, less nicely educated to mercantile honor, jauntily sets about repairing his shattered fortunes, and gaily trims his sails to catch the changing wind? And between these extremes are there not all possible gradations of feeling and of conduct? So is it with our debt to God. He who has inherited a sensitive conscience, and has been trained to shrink from the smallest stain, will on that very account be deeply humbled even by sins which others make light of, and will highly value the mercy that forgives them. A coarser nature, habituated to vice, and saturated with depraved ideas, may accept forgiveness with surprisingly little sense of the goodness of God. It is not, in short, the amount of sin, but the sense of it, which is the measure of gratitude

to Him who forgives it. To suppose that by sinning deeply you secure that one day you will love much, is a fallacy. You may have more sin to be conscious of ; but your consciousness of it, instead of being greater, will be less. You will seek in vain for the old shame, for the early remonstrances of conscience, for the same humiliation on account of many sins that you once had on account of few. Your many sins will stand as facts in your history ; but your heart, long used to their company, will refuse to loathe them as once it did. To be very wicked is no safe receipt for becoming very good.

But the fact to which our Lord points in the parable is the commonly recognized one, that abstinence from crime, and from vices which society condemns, and which stain the outward life, frequently produces a self-satisfied and superficial character. The Pharisee is essentially shallow. He accustoms himself to judge by what appears ; and when he is conscious that he satisfies the requirements of men like himself, who see no deeper than the conduct, he thinks little of his essential character, and spends no pains on ascertaining in what his virtue is rooted. The obvious difference between himself and the flagrant transgressor of the law betrays him into self-complacency, pride, and ignorance of the spiritual life and of God. Such a person remains unhumbled, and has no thirst for forgiveness, not being sensible of defile-

ment. He criticises Christ, observes and considers but does not fully understand Him. He investigates His relation to other men; but no instinct of his own prompts him to cast himself upon His friendship as the very Person he needs.

In contrast to this cold and self-satisfied character, our Lord sets the humbled penitent, the person who is broken-hearted on account of the defilement and accumulating misery and hopelessness of his sin. His transgression may have been of a kind that makes a dark blot on the life. Originally of a warm and passionate nature, he may have burst the ordinary trammels which society lays upon men, and may have brought into his life a great deal of wretchedness. He may be so entangled that deliverance seems hopeless; character and strength of will alike gone, he may go from day to day not knowing where to look for any help, and sometimes disposed to abandon all thought of restoration, and give himself frankly and finally to ruin. Such a person, when he is lifted out of his solitary despair by the loving recognition of Christ, when he feels the forgiving hand laid upon him and sees the gate of a new life standing open at his very feet, when he becomes conscious that through all his vileness and selfishness a Divine compassion has followed him, is wholly overcome with mingled shame and joy, and hails the Saviour as One who seems to have been provided precisely for his necessities. This

is the advantage that the conscious sinner has over the self-righteous Pharisee. The sins of the one being branded by public sentiment, and bringing the sinner into collision with physical and social laws, are recognized by the sinner himself as deadly and humiliating evils. He cannot blind himself to the fact that forgiveness and cleansing, inward help and purity, are needed by himself. Sin, if it has not deepened his nature, has, at all events, convinced him of its own reality, and of the terrible influence it can exert in a human life. The Person who sets him free from this pervasive, intractable, and overmastering evil becomes all in all to him.

But how was Simon, and how are we, to profit by the knowledge that love to Christ is the result of forgiveness? We are conscious that for the settlement and perfecting of the spirit there is nothing like love to Christ. We know that the existence in us of this affection would secure that our relations to everything else should be right. We have a sense of degradation so long as we are attracted by other persons and things, and yet feel only a slight attraction and an insecure attachment to Christ. We would fain love Him with the whole strength of our nature. But how are we to achieve this highest state of feeling? It is useless to demand love, as if such a demand could be directly enforced. This is the old dead law over again: "Thou shalt love." This, we find,

we cannot fulfil. We cannot love just because we are commanded to love ; no, nor because it would be to our advantage to love, nor even because we wish to do so. Love must be spontaneous : it is created in presence of what fits our nature, so that often we cannot tell why we love such and such a person, not understanding our own nature sufficiently to see the suitability. Love to Christ is the spontaneous product of our sense of His suitability to our nature and condition, and of our indebtedness to him. A sense of indebtedness does in some cases produce hatred rather than love. But we cannot seek or accept forgiveness until we are humbled and see something of the transcendent attractiveness of the Lord. The soil is thus prepared for the springing of love in response to the sunshine of His favor.

Besides forgiveness is not a solitary gift. It is the beginning of a new life, a center from which life and light radiate, a germ which exists not so much for itself as for what it produces. It brings assurance of a friendship that is of infinite value ; it imparts a reliance upon God, as our God, teaching us to count upon Him, exhibiting to us His hitherto unthought-of goodness. It pervades the soul with new and exhilarating sensations, and fills it with new desires and purposes. Therefore the Gospel does not directly say "Love," but "Believe." Trust in Christ as willing to forgive. Bring to Him your empty, ruined, ungodly, un-



loving spirit, and have it healed, filled, renewed. Act upon what you at present know, that He makes provision in His own person and work for sinful men. Humbly appeal to Him with such penitence and with such earnestness as you have ; and as you open your spirit more and more to His influence, and find increasingly how complete you are in Him, your love will grow. It may not be of the passionate type elicited in this woman by the visible presence of the Lord, but it will be sound enough to urge you to serve and to please Him. The character of the love we bear Him must be in some respects different from that which those felt who saw His loving expression of face, and heard their forgiveness pronounced by His own lips ; but it cannot be impossible or unlikely that we should learn truly and deeply to love Him who alone brings into our life the fruitful and happy expectation of endless purity and love, who alone gives us assurance that this life is anything better than a short and uneasy dream. Can we fail to love Him whose love for us is, after all, almost the only fixed and sure thing we can count upon ? Can we fail to love Him to whom we must be indebted for as great a forgiveness as was this woman ?

She sat and wept beside His feet ; the weight  
Of sin oppressed her heart ; for all the blame,  
And the poor malice of the worldly shame,  
To her was past, extinct, and out of date ;  
Only the *sin* remained,—the leprous state ;

She would be melted by the heat of love,  
By fires far fiercer than are blown to prove  
And purge the silver ore adulterate.  
She sat and wept, and with her untressed hair  
Still wiped the feet she was so blest to touch ;  
And He wiped off the soiling of despair  
From her sweet soul, because she loved so much.  
I am a sinner, full of doubts and fears ;  
Make me a humble thing of love and tears.

## THE GOOD SAMARITAN.

LUKE X. 25-37.

THE lawyer who unwittingly gave occasion to our Lord to utter the Parable of the Good Samaritan, was not one of those who sought to betray Him into some indiscreet or unorthodox expression with which they might accuse Him before the authorities. He was rather of the less offensive type of person very largely represented in our own day, who takes an interest in religious subjects and religious teachers, who goes to hear all the varieties of preaching, and is ready with an opinion on every novel theory, and who for the most part measures all he hears by a standard as obsolete and inapplicable as it would be to measure the sufficiency of a town's defenses by their ability to resist sling-stones or battering rams. This lawyer tested our Lord by putting to Him a question on which a great many others hinged, and which gave promise of a lively discussion in which a number of our Lord's opinions would be expressed and a full view of His teaching laid open. He wished to arrive at that kind of knowledge of our Lord's religious position and where

abouts which in our own day is sometimes sought to be reached by putting the question, Do you believe in miracles? or, Do you believe that Jesus is truly and properly God? The question, however, proved an unfortunate one for the scribe's purpose, though one of the luckiest ever put, in so far as it called out one of those Parables which the child eagerly listens to and which never throughout his whole life cease to have some influence upon him.

What answer the lawyer expected it is impossible to say. Certainly he did not expect to be referred directly and solely to the moral law, but probably thought he should hear of fasts and prayer and sacrifices. And in responding as he did and quoting a perfect summary of the law, he no doubt anticipated that Jesus would speak of purely religious duties in which the scribe was probably exemplary, or would at all events take off the edge of the bare commandment by muffling it round with a number of observances, explanations, and so forth. But in place of this he is staggered by having the naked law thrust home upon himself as the sole and sufficient reply to his own question: That is God's law; He asks no more; you already know all His requirement; *do it*, and you live.

There is, of course, not the smallest shade of quibble in this answer of our Lord's. It is the simple eternal truth. All we have to do to inherit eternal life is to love. God is love, and in

creating us He made us such that all we have to do is to love. Let us only do this, heartily love God and our neighbor, and we fulfil the whole law. God has given us this feeling to be both the spring and regulator of all else, so that if it be in life and healthy exercise all else goes well with us. To ask why we may not hate or neglect, is to ask why we are as we are, why God has made us thus? For us eternal life is eternal love. Christ did not come to abolish this law, but to fulfil it; to make it possible to us to keep this eternal law of our being. What we in this generation have to do and to be in order to be eternally alive, is, of course, precisely the same as what men of any generation have had to do and to be; the difference is, that we have better means of fulfilling the law.

The lawyer, however, cannot allow his question to be so easily disposed of. He seeks to pursue the subject, and accordingly puts the further question, "Who is my neighbor?" The simplicity of the answer of Jesus to his first question must have excited in the minds of the bystanders some suspicion of the scribe's sincerity. They must have felt that any one professing to know the law might have answered such a question for himself. The scribe therefore "desiring to justify himself," to show that he had a real interest in the subject, and that it was not so easily disposed of as Christ's answer implied, asks for a definition

of the term "neighbor." To one trained as he was, it was a natural inquiry, and yet it betrays the shallowness of his thoughts on the subject. No one whose heart was filled with love could have asked such a question. Love never seeks limits, but always outlets wider and freer. In His reply, therefore, our Lord does not direct attention to the objects of love, but to those who exercise it. He does not directly answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?"—a question that bore in it the hope that these neighbors might prove to be few and such as might be easily loved—friends, relatives, connections; but He shows, by an instance of the actual working of love, that it *makes* neighbors. It is not the defining of neighbors that gives us the definition of love, but the experience of love that defines for us who are our neighbors. He makes the lawyer at once see who his neighbor is, by showing him what love is. He lets him see that his question cannot be asked by a loving heart. Love is here, as elsewhere, a much prompter and truer teacher than theological definition.

It is this, then, that our Lord teaches by means of the Parable—that love, or a merciful spirit, finds a neighbor in every one that is in need and can be helped; that no tie of kindred or obligation imposed by office is so keen-sighted in detecting a neighbor as love is. This He illustrates with the same wonderful readiness and finished per-

fection and fertility of thought as are displayed in all the Parables.

The instance of misery or misfortune which our Lord chose was one constantly occurring. It was as common for a man to fall among thieves on the Jericho road and be left half dead as it is now for miners to be killed by an explosion of fire-damp or for men to be maimed for life by a machinery accident. So notorious had that road become for robbery and violence that it was called "the red or bloody way." It only needs to be observed about this poor man, that he lay in the most urgent need of a friend, of one who would give him help, of one who would take a little trouble and spend a little time over him. It remained to be seen whether such a person would turn up.

The first to come to the spot was a priest, that is, the man of all others bound to do him a friendly turn. The priest was not only a Jew, he was the representative of the Jews, the Jew by pre-eminence; as especially Jewish as the British sailor is especially British, and to be counted on wherever a fellow-countryman is in trouble. He was by his birth and by his office the brother of all his race, not suffered to recognize one tribe more than another, not suffered to allow even his own family ties to draw him from close attachment to all the people. The medical officer of a parish would surely not pass a man lying on the road with his head cut open, or why does he hold his appoint-

ment? A soldier who has fallen wounded in a retired part of the field of battle will hail it as an unusually fortunate circumstance if the first man that comes up is the surgeon of his own regiment. So, if this wounded Jew had strength enough to see the priest as he came in sight, he must have considered it a remarkably happy coincidence which brought just the person who might most naturally be expected to show him kindness—one who lived for the people's good, and one who had just been engaged at Jerusalem in services well fitted to bring him into sympathy with the various distresses of men. If any man might be included in the term "neighbor," surely the priest might.

But the priest thought otherwise. Like many another man, he was content to do what he was obliged to do, and what his ritual prescribed, but had none of the spirit of his office. And so it had happened to him as it happens to all who so use their official position—it had hardened on him as a shell, and separated him from his fellows. He was not more a man because a priest, but less a man. It was not the fulness of his humanity that made him a fit priest; but his priestliness actually blighted his humanity all round.

The other order of men who might chiefly have been expected, from the nature of their order and office, to be forward to assist and put themselves as public property at the disposal of all, was the Levitical. The insufficiency of a merely official



tie is therefore further illustrated by our Lord's introduction of a Levite on the scene. He also sees, but turns his head away and almost persuades himself he does not know his help is needed. It is as if the English consul in some Italian port, in passing along the street, saw an Englishman being assaulted and in danger of his life, but instead of interfering turned into a side street, trying to persuade himself that the man was not an Englishman, or that the quarrel was not serious, though he saw blood; or that the robbers were Government officials securing a culprit.

It is unfortunately too easy for us all to imagine, with the aid of our self-knowledge, what excuses these men would make for themselves. Possibly the priest knew the Levite was behind him, and thought the work fitter for him; if so, it is one instance more of the folly of leaving to others work which is fairly our own. Possibly both men were tired with their service in Jerusalem, and eager to get home. Possibly both were a little afraid of delaying in a spot in which there was such speaking evidence of its insecurity. Probably neither of them cared to get mixed up with a business which might involve them in legal proceedings, necessitating them to appear as witnesses, or which might even bring suspicion on themselves. So they passed by on the other side—they tried not to see it. From our translation you might suppose the Levite made a more minute examina-

tion of the man than the priest—"came and looked on him," it says—but the words are the same in both cases. There is no reason to suppose the Levite was either so much harder-hearted that he went out of curiosity close up to the man to see how he was hurt, nor that he was so much softer-hearted as to intend at first to help him, but found, or persuaded himself he found, his wounds too deep for skill of his. The significant fact in both cases is, that they saw the man, but passed by on the other side, as if trying to persuade themselves there was no man there and no reason why they should pause.

This conduct, I say, we can too well understand. Which of us has not been guilty of passing by on the other side, of leaving misery unrelieved because it was not clamorous? This unfortunate, lying half dead by the roadside, could make no importunate supplications for relief, could not sit up and prove to the priest that it was his duty to help him, could not even ask help, so as to lay on the priest the responsibility of positive refusal; and so he got past with less discomfort, but not with less guilt. The need is often greatest where least is asked. And how many forms of misery are there lying within our knowledge as we journey along the blood-stained road of life, but which we pass by because they do not bar our progress till we give our help, or because it is possible for us to put

them out of our mind and live *as though* these things were not. It is true we could not live, or certainly could only live in depression and wretchedness, if we kept constantly before our minds all known suffering,—if we had a vivid image of the pain and sorrow at this present moment afflicting thousands of gentle and innocent persons,—if we set before the mind's eye the the hopeless, wearing anguish that is hidden in every hospital in this and other lands, the blank despair that numbs the spirit of whole tribes swept into slavery under the cruelest oppression, the various miseries and difficulties which desolate life and cause many and many a victim to curse the day of his birth. To go about our ordinary duties with all this present to our mind would be as impossible as to live in peace, or to live at all, if our senses were acute enough to make audible to us all the noise within a radius of two or three miles, or to make visible to us all that exists unseen. But the passing by on the other side which leaves guilt upon the conscience is the putting aside of distress that comes naturally before us, and the refusing to assist where circumstances give us the opportunity of assisting. A lost child is crying on the street, but it is awkward to be seen leading a dirty, crying child home, so we refuse to notice that the child is lost; a man is lying as if he were ill, but he may only be intoxicated, and it looks foolish to meddle, and

may be troublesome, so we leave him to others, though another minute in that position may, for all we know, make the difference between life and death. You read a paragraph of a paper giving a thrilling account of a famine in China, or some other great calamity; but when you come to a clause intimating that subscriptions will be received at such and such a place, you pass to another column, and refuse to allow that to make the impression on your mind which you feel it is beginning to make. In short, you will, in these and many like circumstances, wait till you are asked to help; you know you could not in decency refuse if you were asked, if the matter were fully laid before you and all the circumstances detailed, but you will put yourself out of reach before this can be done; you will not expose yourself to the risk of having your charitable feelings stirred, or at any rate of having your help drawn upon; you will, if possible, wipe the thing from your mind, you will carefully avoid following up any clue, or considering steadily any hint or suggestion of suffering.

But, as we have said, it was not just another *man*, or just another *Jew*, that came and saw this man lying in his blood, it was, both in the case of the priest and Levite, one who had a special tie or obligation to be compassionate. These men were supposed to be a kind of embodied and living law of God, an incarnate compassion,

a reflex on earth of the mercy of the Most High. They of all men should have recognized this Jew as their brother. Their peculiar guilt is ours when we repudiate any special responsibility, and make as though there were no tie between us and the object needing help. And happy are they who can say that at least of this special guilt they are free,—who have really filled up with active love all the relationships of life by which God has brought them into connection with others, and who cannot reproach themselves with failing to see what any friend, servant, relative required, or, having seen it, to do it for them,—who know no instance in which they failed to bring assistance because it was of a troublesome kind, or of a kind that would have brought them into connection with disreputable people, or would have made them look foolish or meddling or romantic. Surely if not in your own case, then in the case of others, you see that it is not always the relationship that gives the love, but the love that makes the relationship,—that there is often a *friend* that sticketh closer than a brother—an outlaw from the faith that is more substantially helpful, wiser and readier in advice and prompter in lending a hand, than one belonging to the same “household of faith.” Had you met this Levite after seeing his conduct, would you not have been tempted to say to him, What are you a Levite for, if not to

give such help? If you encountered a police official who carefully avoided all dangerous and troublesome interference, would you not be apt to challenge his right to retain his post? But might we not turn our challenge on ourselves, and say to ourselves, Why are you a Christian? what do you unite yourself to Christ for? Is it not that you may be able to do good, to be helpful, to become salt to the earth, and of exceptional value among men? If, then, you shrink from all exceptional duty, from all that calls for trouble and real sacrifice, from all that puts you seriously about, what is the good of your Christianity? where does it go?

But while there are men whose lack of humanity empties their relationships and every office they hold of all service to others, save only what they are rigidly bound to by the letter of their engagement, and compelled to by the insistence or observance of others, there are also men whose love throws out sympathies on all sides, invents obligations where no claim could be enforced, and breaks through restrictions naturally hindering them from interference. So far from seeking excuse for not helping, they invent excuses for helping, or are unconscious that excuses are needed. Of this class of men the Good Samaritan is the mortal type—the once-drawn picture of the master-hand that needs no added touch. In him you see that it is love that makes the differ-

ence; that in the time of need a compassionate heart is to more purpose than any tie, engagement, office, or bond. All the excuses the others had might have been his, and many more. He was not bound to the man by any tie of country, he was not even a mere foreigner, but was of the Samaritans, who had no dealings with the Jews. What the Christian is to the Mohammedan, the Jew was to the Samaritan. Born among a people whose most active energy was spent in demonstrations of enmity against the Jews, part of his education must have been to annoy and persecute. Neither was this man an official like the priest, who might have been greeted with a respectful salutation had the man been in a condition to have given it, and who would probably have resented the omission of such a token of respect; but he was an alien who would more likely have read the expression of a mocking hatred on the face of the passer-by, or have even been greeted with cursing, or "Thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil." But over all these influences love triumphs, and he with whom this wounded Jew would at any other time have contemptuously refused to deal has now dealings with him of a very touching nature. That is to say, it is love that makes man neighbor to man. The true neighbor is the man who has a compassionate heart and a friendly spirit. Where this is wanting, it avails not that a man lives next door,

or belongs to the same congregation, or is a member of the same club or union or profession; it ought to be so that these external associations quicken our friendliness, and so they *often* do, and where love exists they find expression for it in many suitable ways; but these external bonds can never supply the place of love. No doubt the people who saw how careful the Samaritan was of his *protégé* would say, He must be his brother, or his neighbor, or an old friend; for the truth is, that genuine compassion and affection make a man brother, neighbor, and friend of all. It is not, then, by any marks in others that you can test who is your neighbor; it is not by the marks of race, neighborhood, religion, common pursuits, old friendships, not by anything in them at all you can determine; but only by what is in yourself, namely, humanity of disposition, friendliness, compassion, or whatever name you choose to give it. Love alone can determine who is your neighbor.

Another point is incidentally brought out by our Lord. Love does not ask, What claim has this man and that man on me? but, What does this or that man need that I can do for him? It must have been, and it still is, an edifying sight to see the *completeness* of the Samaritan's attentions—to see him kneeling with the interested, anxious eye of a friend by the side of the Jew, gently raising his head, cleansing his wounds, mollifying



them with oil, binding them with strips torn from the first thing that came to hand, restoring in him the grateful desire of life, and greeting his return to consciousness with the strength-giving congratulations of genuine affection. We might suppose he had now done enough. How is his own business to go forward if he thus delays? But love is not so soon satisfied. He sits by him till he is strong enough to be set on his beast, and does not resign his charge to any other. He does not feel that the robbed man is off his hands when he has got him to an inn. He has himself to go on his journey, but he will not on that account, nor on any account, disconnect himself from the man; he will disconnect himself from him only when he needs no more assistance. This is love's way. To be asking, How far am I to go in helping others? shows we have not love. To be asking, To what extent must I love? Where can I stop? Whom can I exclude? and From what sacrifices may I reasonably turn away? is simply to prove that we have not as yet the essential thing, a loving spirit; for love asks no such questions, but ever seeks for wider and wider openings.

This, then, is our Lord's answer to the question, How shall I inherit eternal life? The answer is, Love as this Samaritan did. You will not receive eternal life as the reward of doing so, in the sense that, having now helped men and

sacrificed for them, you shall enter into an eternity in which you may cease doing so, and live in some other relation to them. Not so. But by loving men thus you hereby enter into that state of spirit and that relation to your fellow-men which is eternal life, the only eternal relation possible. What more can you be asked to do than to love those you have to do with? It is *that* which will alone enable you to fulfil all duty to them. You need not ask, What is due to this man or that, how much service, how much assistance, how much substantial help? These are very useful questions where there is no love, but they are never sufficient, and they are therefore all summarily dismissed by Paul in his brief rule, "Owe no man anything, *but* to love one another,"—that is the one debt always due, never paid off, always renewed, and that covers all others. You are meant to live happily and strongly and sweetly; the relations of society part to part are meant to move as sweetly as the finest machinery, and love alone can accomplish this. It is a mere groping after harmony and order and social well-being that we are occupied with while we try to adjust class to class, nation to nation, man to man, by outward laws or defined positions.

One of our most popular teachers, Emerson, is indeed bold enough to say, in direct contradiction to this Parable, "Do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor

men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me, and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom, by all spiritual affinity, I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison if need be." Him we may well leave to be answered by that deeper-seeing heathen, who said, "Nature bids me assist *men*; and whether they be bond or free, gentlefolk or freedmen, what matter? Wherever a man is, there is room for doing good." To obey Emerson's law would be to introduce into a world already sufficiently broken up into sects, classes, and parties, a division more alienating and inextinguishable than creed distinctions, more bitter and personal than race hatred, more irreconcilable and truly hardening than class separation.

We may therefore measure ourselves thus, and thus we may see what our religion has done for us. Our Lord came to set us right with one another; to put us on a footing with those with whom we are to spend eternity, such as shall make it possible to us to do so. He said, again and again, "This is the command I give unto you, that ye love one another." This is one half of our salvation, one half which involves the other, and you may measure the help you have received from Christ and ascertain in how far you are a saved person by the ability you have

to keep this command. This is the test John gives: "We know that we have passed from death to life." How? "Because we love the brethren." How is it, then, with ourselves? While Christ tells us we should not hesitate even to lay down our lives for the brethren, that is to say should not be behind even natural generosity, which week by week prompts men to sacrifice life for others, even for persons they could not name,—while Christ leaves us this command, and illustrates it by His whole life, do we grudge to live uncomfortably for our brethren? This comfort and that we raise to the rank of necessities, and limit our givings and our sympathies. But love sweeps away such necessities, and shows itself the highest law of all. If still you say, *What* are we to do for others? is it not enough to give what law and decency require us to give? is it not enough to forbear doing harm, speaking evil, inflicting injury? your Lord has but the one answer: Love them first of all, and see what will come of that.

## THE RICH FOOL.

LUKE xii. 13-21.

THIS is yet another Parable in which our Lord illustrates the attitude He expects us to assume towards the world and its goods. It was occasioned by an unusually blunt exhibition of worldliness. Our Lord had been assuring His disciples that if they were brought into court, the Holy Ghost would teach them what to say. There is a man in the crowd to whom, at last, the words of Jesus begin to seem practical ; courts, lawsuits, inheritances, were the staple of his thoughts, and the familiar words make him prick his ears. This ability to speak in courts is the very thing he has been seeking. If Jesus has it, He will possibly be good enough to use it for him, and so he will get his law gratis, as well as recover his share in the inheritance. This is a delightful prospect, too good an opportunity to let slip. And so, utterly blind to the kind of interests our Lord had at heart, utterly regardless of the crowd, possessed with the one thought that for months and years had consumed him, and seeing only that Jesus had great wisdom and justice, a remarkable

faculty of putting things in their right light, and an authoritative manner, which surely not even his brother could resist, he blurts out—"Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me."

To one whose interests are religious, or political, or literary, or scientific, it is always amusing to see the unbounded importance which many men whose business is in money attach to their department of affairs, and the unaffected earnestness with which they discuss them. There is a solemnity in their manner when they speak of large sums; they seem to grow and swell with the amounts they name, a mystery and awe in their tone as they tell of big transactions, a pompous and grand dignity as they give the history of some bit of property, which is abundantly instructive. They turn from religious talk to this monetary style with the air of one who should say, Religion is all very well as a pleasing speculation or emotional tonic, but this other is the reality; let us now put aside all mere play of the imagination and turn to the substantial affairs of life. They constantly betray the understanding on which they live, the understanding that everything must give way to business, that *it* is the real thread on which life is strung.

The egotism of worldliness was never exhibited in a more barefaced, naked, shameless form. Here had this man, through all our Lord's conversa-

tion, been thinking his own worldly thoughts; what he gathers from all our Lord has been saying is, that He would make a good lawyer; and the best thing he can imagine that Christ, with His felt authority and goodness, can do for him, is to help him to a better income. He is sensible of Christ's power; if he was informed that He had come down from heaven, he would not be disposed to question it. What is it then, as he stands in presence of this highest beneficence, that he will claim; what is it, now, that he finds his opportunity, that he will have? That half-acre his brother has kept him out of. So are men judged by their wishes and cravings.

In many small towns you find harmless lunatics, who are glad to find a stranger on their streets whom they can lay hold of, and pour out their wrongs to, and repeat the old story of their claims to this estate or that title or handsome fortune. One would be glad to think this man was such an irresponsible creature, who, merely recognizing in our Lord a strange face, gave utterance to his one constant demand, "Speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance." But covetousness and lunacy are always so nearly allied that this man can scarcely be considered as showing any special signs of lunacy. We can all detect in ourselves the germs of his character. We know how possible it is to retain a grasping disposition and avaricious purposes through very

solemn converse with things spiritual. We know what it is to let some one important affair take such possession of our thoughts that, for the time, God and all spiritual things are as though they were not. Nay, do we not know what it is to calculate on the influence of Christ moving some one to do us a worldly advantage, which otherwise we could not hope for?

What a contrast did these two central figures of the crowd present! This man in whom no response whatever is found to anything spiritual, who can stand and listen to God Incarnate and be conscious of no new desires, no new world opening to his hope,—this poor shrunken creature on the one hand, and on the other Jesus, in whose eye no answering sparkle met the glitter of gold, who could listen to talk about disputed successions and undivided properties without the smallest interest, who could not be tempted to assume authority in affairs where the arbiter would not be forgotten. What our Lord continued throughout His life to do, He did here—refused to interfere in civil matters, repelling indignantly the idea that He was to be used as a petty magistrate. Not that the kingdom He had come to establish was to have no influence on the world, for it was destined to influence its minutest affair, but this was all to come about in a regular way; the hearts of men were to be Christianized, and they being so, all other things



would feel the influence. Our Lord would not spend a word in composing that fraternal difference, but He would spend all the force of His teaching on extirpating the cause of the difference. "Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?" He said, but also, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness." If our Lord, who saw in every case what was right to be done, refused to intermeddle, how much more should we limit ourselves to what is our own sphere, who neither clearly and wholly understand, nor are wise to act. A great part of the mischief that is done in the world comes of men overstepping the region with which they are familiar, and in which they are authoritative. It is amazing to hear with what boldness and unsuspecting confidence men pronounce upon matters with which they have had the most meager acquaintance.

It was the shock produced by this man's naive display of his absorbing worldliness which made our Lord at once turn to the crowd with the words, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things he possesseth." This, then, is pointed out as the great snare of covetousness, that it tends to make a man identify himself with his possessions and rate himself by them. This is what our Lord here lays His finger on, as being especially disastrous in this vice; it blinds a man

to the fact that he remains forever distinct from his possessions; that he is one thing, his possessions another; that he and they cannot be amalgamated, but must remain separate in essence and in destiny.

That covetousness has this tendency every one knows. The man who values himself for what he has, and not for what he is, the man who fancies himself great because his possessions are great, is one of the most familiar objects of ridicule. But take heed, for there is a current setting that way which all of us feel the force of. Money-making is one of the most obvious and convenient goals which a man can choose for himself in life. Many men, when young, are sadly at a loss what to make of life, and are burdened with their capabilities. They know they can do something, but cannot determine what. They have not tested themselves, and cannot say what might be the prudent course. They have no strong natural bent towards any particular calling. Now to realize a competence supplies an aim, easily thought of and easily held in view. To make a fortune is an appreciable result, that a man may spend his effort on and measure his progress by. If it be made, there it is to show, it is actual visible achievement, a monument of labor spent. And in the course towards the goal there is a great deal of satisfaction, there is evident progress. A man is fallen very low indeed, if he is

not at all concerned to know that he is making any advance one way or another. Now, men can very soon learn the art of measuring their progress, not by themselves, or their own personal growth, not by any ripeness of character and real internal acquisition, but by mere outward, material gain. They are content with some little glows of satisfaction that they are rising in the world, that they are able this year to command some luxuries that were last year beyond their reach, and especially that this actual thing, money, has increased in their hands. This is the way we practically come to measure ourselves by what we have, and to think that our life consists in the abundance of the things we possess.

And what our Lord insists upon here, and seeks to impress us with, is the folly and disaster of so doing. He shows us that a man and his possessions are distinct; that a man's life is not longer nor happier in proportion to what he has; that the man, the living soul, is one thing, the goods another; that he goes one way, they another; and that by no ingenuity can a man get himself and his property so united that *he* shall be beautiful, strong, lasting as it is. He may fill his shelves with the wisest and most elevating books, and yet remain illiterate; he may gather round him precious works of art, and be a clown and a boor; he may buy up a county, and be the smallest souled man in it; he may erect a mansion which will last

for ten generations, and may not have ten years of life or ten minutes of health to enjoy it. A man's possessions obstinately stand off from himself. Naturally we all feel that we are expanding and enlarging ourselves in extending our possessions, that we are more firmly rooting ourselves on earth ; in each of them we seem to have a mirror reflecting ourselves, and each of them adds to *our* importance. Our Lord, therefore, presents to our view a man who has abundant, superabundant possessions, but has no life left. He had laid up *goods* in abundance, and reckoned on life in abundance, a long, full, lively life. He forgot the distinction, but it was made nevertheless. He is shown to us separate from his possessions, and transferred to a sphere where, like old-world coins, their value is unknown and they can neither be accounted, used, nor enjoyed.

The rich man of the parable is represented as one of the exceptionally favored children of fortune. He had already become wealthy at an age at which he might naturally count upon having several years of enjoyment. His wealth, too, had been acquired, not by hard fatiguing labor, but in that line of life in which, more than in any other, a man's time is his own, and he can work or play as he feels disposed. And especially it is to be remarked that no sin attached to his money-making ; he had not made his money by gambling, he had not profited by another man's disaster, no

one was the loser for his winnings, it was the honest, unsullied gift of Heaven to him ; his fields yielded enormously. But as a sudden and great alteration of circumstances is the best revealer of what a man really is, this sudden wealth disclosed a selfishness in this land-holder of which before he had perhaps not been suspected.

The manner in which his wealth had come to him sets his ingratitude to God in a stronger light. Though his wealth had come to him through that medium which is most evidently at God's discretion, so evidently that even men who are ungodly in other matters make some show of acknowledging that years of famine and years of plenty depend on God's will,—though the gifts of God had come to him by the shortest route, as if from and out of God's very hand, unhidden by any complicated transactions with men,—though his wealth had been built up by the elements, whose influence he could neither command nor restrain,—yet he seizes and claims as his own the fruits of his fields, as if he had been the maker of them, as if no one else had spent anything on them, and as if he had to consult no one but himself as to their disposal. What most men would have decency if not devotion enough to call a Godsend, he calls a windfall, and gathers up as his very own. A great success solemnizes some men ; they hurry home and fall on their knees ; they are ashamed of so much goodness coming

to men so unworthy, and they hasten to make acknowledgment. Serious-minded men who engage in business not for the mere excitement and gain of it, walk in God's presence, and bear in mind that the silver and the gold are His, that promotion cometh not from the north or south by the wind that happens to be blowing, and are therefore ever ready to say, What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me? Can anything be more pitiable than the man who stands at his counting-house door and forbids God's entrance while his balance is being struck, who does not care that God should know how much he made last year, but goes and prays that this God would give him success this year? Is it not astonishing how religious men who profess to live for God, should so carefully keep Him from interfering in their money matters, that is, in those matters round which their life really revolves? If we cannot go before God and frankly say, This is what I have made this year, and I could not have made it but for Thee and Thy help,—this is because we fear God will claim too much, and prompt us to use it as we are not prepared to do. Must there not be something wrong if we are not letting God's eye and judgment fully and freely into every transaction we engage in, and every gain we make?

In the case of this rich man, certainly his blindness to the source of his wealth and the bad use

he made of it did hang together. He missed the opportunity of being God's almoner, of dispensing God's bounty to the needy. He did not recognize that it was the Lord who gave, and therefore it was not the Lord's poor who got. The goods are *his* goods—he can't get past that; he may do what he likes with them, he cannot see that there is any other vote or voice in the matter. In what sense the fulness of the world is God's he has no mind to consider. His barns are bursting, he has more wealth than he knows what to do with; but one thing is certain, it must all be spent on himself. You would suppose he had never seen a hungry child in his life; you would suppose he had never met a beggar, or seen a blind man or a cripple in his market town. "Where shall I bestow my goods?" This was his difficulty, and yet he had the world before him, a world filled with want, abundant in misery, rich in cases of need. How many hundreds there were who could have given him very pointed and definite directions! how many who would quickly have relieved him from his perplexity! how many at that very hour, when he was wondering what he could do with his superfluity, were tortured by the opposite perplexity, wondering where they could get bread for these pale, appealing children, where they could find temporary aid to help them through a year of disaster! Among all the investments he had heard and

thought of, there was one prospectus he had apparently not seen, that to which God has put His name, "He that giveth to the poor, lendeth to the Lord." He did not apprehend that their bare and empty homes would be better houses of investment than his own locked and useless barns.

It is no more than what thousands of rich men, and of men who are not rich, every day do; he would not be in the Parable if he were exceptional. He is here because he is typical—typical of the men who, in considering how they shall invest their gains, look only to their own interests,—who, in considering their next step, have chiefly in view, what advantage can I win for myself? and who do not consider what good they can do. Life is constructed almost entirely on selfish principles: business is carried on upon the understanding that every man must look out for himself. One of the many benefits of war is, that it counteracts this selfishness; men learn to think of the common cause, of the public good, of the prosperity of the country, of the honor of their regiment. But in most departments of life men are prone to consider merely or chiefly, How can I get the utmost of good for myself? Often and often no other thought whatever is at the root of an investment, a transaction, an enterprise. The future is sketched in the mind, and I am the center, and all else is arranged so as most



effectually to contribute to *my* joy. They are the few whose first thought it is, Is there any one I can benefit? and who so frequently think how they can promote the welfare and happiness of others, that at last this becomes a habit with them.

When we consider the sleek and complacent selfishness of the man that could quietly propose to spend many years of comfort without a thought of others, we are almost glad to hear of his sudden disappointment. Doubtless the man might have died as suddenly if he had been better prepared. Had he invited all the poor of the district, to make a distribution to them of his surplus, he might all the same have died without seeing his benevolence enjoyed. But while there are few things more delightful to contemplate than the sudden painless departure of the man who has walked with God, there are few things so shocking as the sudden death of the sinner, who dies in passion with an oath on his lips, or never wakens from the insensibility of drunkenness. And what this Parable draws attention to is the vanity, the insecurity of worldly and selfish expectations. The man had one view of the future: God another. The man was saying, "Thou hast much goods laid up for many years:" God was saying, "Not another night shall you possess a single bushel." What a satire is here upon man! Truly every man walketh in a vain show; he heapeth up riches

and knoweth not who shall gather them. He builds his house and purposes to live and see good days, but a voice falls from heaven, Thou misreckoning man, the house may be built, but there will be no *man* to inhabit it.

In his own thoughts the man was living through long years of ease and plenty, but the cold reality touched his warm expectations, and they withered death-stricken. The wind passeth over him and he is gone, and the place he counted his knows him no more. He was reckoning that no life could be worthy of comparison with his; that his shrewd plans had been fully accomplished, his utmost hopes exceeded, he was in the full triumph of self-gratulation, counting himself the most successful of men, the man to be envied; but this is God's judgment: "Thou fool." But might he not set even God's judgment of his conduct at defiance? Was he not surrounded by tokens of his success, by proofs of his wisdom? Alas! in that very article and particular in which he had judged himself most wise, he was exhibited as conspicuous in folly. He had spent all his poor wisdom in providing for this soul of his an easy, merry, plentiful life, and he finds that so far from providing an abundant life for himself, he is unable to secure life of any kind, and would gladly exchange his position for the life of the meanest of his slaves. Stripped, naked, a bare, desolate soul, he passes from our sight, lost in the darkness

of eternal remorse, his own voice still dolefully echoing the condemning voice of God, his own soul turning on itself with the everlasting reproach "Thou fool! thou fool!"

"This night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall these things be, that thou hast provided?" The answer comes from many a dissipated fortune, from many an auction room, in which are exposed the accumulations of a lifetime. There is one of the places a man proud of his possessions may moralize. The most precious and frequently handled gems of the departed owner are handed over to men who never saw him, or who made a jest of his avarice, or to men who rivaled him, and are now proud of living a year or two longer and getting as their own what they had long grudged to him. The books he read are now penciled by others; his plate his defaced and marked with other names; the very bed he lay on he needs no more; the clothes he wore he shall never again use; his mirrors, it is well they cannot now reflect him.

"So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God." So, that is equally senseless, and in an equally precarious position. But how many does this judgment hit? Yet not all; for some, on finding unexpected means coming into their hands, would have said within themselves, This is delightful, this will enable me to provide for this needy relative, this will at last put

me in a position to make up for loss I unwittingly occasioned. This will precisely fit the wants of this or that benevolent institution that I know makes admirable use of its funds. God identifies Himself with all that is needy on earth, and spending treasure for the needy is spending treasure for God.

And in so spending we become rich towards God, are provided for so far as our outlook Godwards is concerned. How is it then with *us*? Suppose all earthly possessions were suddenly to drop from about you, as they one day will, what would you have left? Would you then be rich or poor? Would the wants you would then begin to feel be amply provided for? Here we are now without our possessions, are we rich at this moment? Suppose we never got back to our homes, suppose we were by some great natural catastrophe at this hour separated from all that we have provided for this life, should we still be rich? Is there something so belonging to you that you can say, This is mine for evermore—mine through every change, through health and sickness, in life and death—mine though I be stripped of all that can be separated from my person, though I stand a bare spirit without connection with material things? Will you honestly give yourselves an answer to this question? What *have* I towards God? What that is certain to increase the nearer I go to Him? Am I so joined

to Him that I can say, "I am persuaded, that neither life nor death, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord?"

## THE BARREN FIG-TREE.

LUKE xiii. 6-9.

THIS Parable formed part of the conversation which our Lord held with those who reported to Him the fate of some Galileans whom Pilate had slaughtered in the temple. The Galileans were notoriously turbulent, and on more than one occasion Pilate quelled their disposition to riot with the decisive and unrelenting ferocity that characterized him. On this occasion he seems to have stepped beyond his jurisdiction, and to have sent soldiers into the temple to slay the sacrificers among the beasts they were sacrificing—an act which would have desecrated a pagan temple, and which was peculiarly horrible in a temple so sacred and exclusive as that of the Jews. Indeed, one is tempted to suppose the atrocity had been magnified by rumor, and that what had at first been related in strong figures was at last taken literally; that Pilate had slaughtered some Galileans who had come to the city to sacrifice, but were not yet inside the temple; and that some one returning to Galilee, and finding himself an object of interest as a participator in the disturbance, and desiring to make a terse and

picturesque report of what had happened, said with an allowable figure of speech that Pilate had mingled their blood with that of their sacrifices. This report a hearer taking literally might suppose to mean that Pilate had sent soldiers into the temple and had slain the worshipers among the altars and sacrificial animals.

Whatever the act of Pilate had been, those who now spoke of it seemed impressed, not so much with any perfidy or profane ferocity on his part, as with the exceptional guilt which they suppose these Galileans must have incurred to justify their consignment to such a doom. They argue that God would not have delivered up any of His worshipers to so shocking a death, had they not been guilty of some exceptional iniquity. And with the pleasure men find in speaking of the disasters of others while themselves secure, and of commenting upon wickedness which they believe to exceed their own, these persons come with their story to Jesus, hoping to hear some edifying discourse on the wickedness of the world at large, and some suggestions which may warrant them in congratulating themselves with still more satisfied complacency.

They are, however, disappointed. In this slaughter of the Galileans, as well as in other calamities to which public attention had been drawn, our Lord sees no evidence of exceptional guilt, but rather samples of calamity threatening the

whole nation. These disasters were the first mutterings of the storm which was shortly to break over the whole community. The Jews were not to look at the Galileans, or at those of their own number on whom the tower of Siloam fell, as separate from themselves by any peculiar wickedness; they were to consider them as integral parts of the nation, and to accept and gather warning from the strokes which thus fell upon the people at large. These strokes, our Lord says, were meant to awaken the whole nation to its precarious condition. They were meant to make the people at large consider whether they did not as a people together deserve a like doom. They are, in short, the first efforts of the husbandman to stimulate the tree to greater activity. The branches which have been cut off are cut off not for any special fault of theirs, but to quicken the whole tree. If the Jewish ear were opened, it would hear in these thickening accidents and disasters, not any private calamity, but the voice of the husbandman wondering how the whole tree can be made to produce any proper and valuable fruit. Hence the Parable of the Fig-tree.

The direct meaning of the Parable is unmistakable. What had happened to these Galileans would shortly happen to the whole nation unless they so repented as to accomplish God's purpose with them. This Jewish people was like a fig-tree enjoying every advantage, but bearing no fruit.



As three years make up the full time which it is reasonable to spend upon the cultivation of an apparently barren tree, so there is a fulness of time in the history of a nation during which it receives its opportunities. This time had now expired with the Jews, and the forty years that were yet given them, in answer to the "Father, forgive them," which our Lord breathed from the cross, were the tree's ultimate year of probation which was to decide its fate. To every nation God has given a special task, and special gifts and opportunities to accomplish it. As the body requires many members, and all the members have not the same office,—as the orchard has many kinds of trees, and one kind cannot bear all fruits,—so each nation has had some special impulse to give to the progress of the race. A modern nation, however civilized, cannot do the work which was committed to an ancient tribe, of choosing out the habitable parts of the earth and sowing the seed which all subsequent times have been reaping. The Greeks and Romans, the Egyptians and Persians, Cyrus, whom God owned as His servant, and many besides, had their peculiar functions in the education of the race and in preparing the world for Christ. But the Jews were called to a distinctive place. A different species of fruit was expected from them. Their special function was to acknowledge Christ when He came, and to form His kingdom. This

fruit they had not borne. As a nation they had failed, and seemed likely yet to fail, whatever individuals among them had done and were yet to do. Having failed and continuing to fail, they would become mere cumberers of the ground. There would be no reason why their national existence should be continued.

The Parable, however, has important personal bearings. Every man's conscience gives the Parable a personal application. You would hardly find any one who would deny that God expects some fruit of his life. If you asked yourself or any one else, Is it a matter of absolute indifference to God what results from your life? you would be answered, That it is impossible to conceive of God at all without supposing that He desires every human life to serve some good purpose. This, at all events, is Christ's view. This it is which made His life what it was, influential to all time, and the unfailing source of the highest energy to all other lives. That is to say, He has given us the most cogent of all demonstrations that in proportion as we accept His view of the connection of our life with God, shall we resemble Him in the utility and permanent result of all we do. It has become obvious that in the world of nature nothing is isolated and independent, but that everything is connected more or less remotely with everything else ; that all nature is one whole, governed by one idea and fulfilling

one purpose. Human lives are under the same law. No life is outside of the plan which comprehends the whole; every life contributes something to the fulfilment of the great purpose all are to serve. Our Lord tells us that this purpose is in the mind of God, and that He judges us by our fulfilment or non-fulfilment of His will. And that we should be reluctant to bring forth fruit to God, or hesitate to live for Him, has its root in the foolish and objectionable idea that God and we have opposing interests, so that to help out God's idea of the world and to work with Him and towards His end is really not our best. Nothing seems to teach us that God is all on our side. It has taken men six thousand years to find out some part of the provision for our good which He has laid up in the material world, and it seems it will take us even longer to discover the provision He has made for feeling and thought and for spiritual strength and joy.

But not only has each human life a purpose; most men have the more or less distinct perception that they are as fig-trees among vines; that they have peculiar opportunities not given to other men, and that in one way or other they enjoy special advantages. The fig-tree of the Parable was not lost among a forest of precisely similar, equally cared-for and equally uncared-for trees; it was *one*, standing by itself among plants of different kind, and receiving different attention. You

have little feeling of responsibility to God so long as you think you have dropped into your place casually as the seed blown by the wind, or that what you receive you receive not because it is suitable for you, and therefore given by God, but only because you and all around you are included in some general order of things, and dealt with in the mass and regardless of individual characteristics. But if you deal with God about your life at all, you find it to be necessarily implied that you ascribe to Him a constant watchfulness over it and a power to introduce what is needful for you, and to give you all that is needed for fruit-bearing, for accomplishing His purpose.

The position, then, that you occupy and the advantages you enjoy are the indication that God means your life to serve a good purpose. If you look at life with the secret or expressed conviction that it is a pitiful and contemptible thing from which nothing good can result, it will in your case become a contemptible and barren affair. But begin with the belief that God's purposes are worth accomplishing, and that they can be and are being accomplished by men, and that you may accomplish them and this will give to your life a steady and hopeful energy, and put your life on the only track that is really eternal. A man may indeed find the thought rising in him, that as some nations have served God's purpose by war, by godless culture, by living out their own nature

irrespective of God, so may I accomplish His purpose although I pursue the bent of my own nature and build up my life solely in accordance with my own views and plans. But why has God given you light about His will if He meant you to make no use of it? You can only judge of the kind of fruit God wishes you to bear by considering the position He has set you in; and you can bear that fruit only by using *all* the advantages He has given you. The gardener leaves some plants out and unsheltered, but others he brings into the walled garden, and some he puts under glass; and if the vine were treated like a gooseberry bush, it would bear neither grapes nor yet gooseberries. So if we exclude or neglect influences which God has seen fit to furnish us with, we must be failing to produce the fruit He wishes. If He has brought you light in Christ which you are not making any use of, if you decline to live in that communion with the heart of all spiritual life which exists in the Father of spirits, then it must be that you are failing to produce the fruit for the sake of producing which He has given you these advantages. Are you sure there is nothing to be gained by fellowship with Christ? are you sure that you can be as complete a man without this person who felt it in Him to draw all men to Him? are you sure that you can serve every good and worthy purpose just as well without any direct help from Him as with it? Because, if you

are not sure, then it is obvious that, for all you know, you are shutting out an influence which would simply make all the difference between bearing fruit and not doing so; between your life serving the best purpose possible and serving a purpose disappointing and disastrous; between fruit borne on the south side of a high brick wall and fruit borne or attempted on the north side.

And what can be more utterly humiliating than to have our life examined by absolute insight and the most loving justice, and to be pronounced barren? To fail in any one department of life is humiliating enough, but to fail over the whole, and to find that the whole thing is gone for nothing, must be impossible to bear. To have consciously failed in helpfulness to a friend, or to have failed as a son or as a parent, to have quite disappointed one who was trusting to us, makes a mark on our conscience we do not easily cover over; to be engaged with others in a work all of which is retarded or spoiled by a piece of stupidity or neglect on our part, affects us with a very sensible shame. But think of failing in what our whole life was given us to accomplish! How vain to defend ourselves by affirming that if we have not pleased God and borne the fruit He desired, we have yet not lived in vain! A young surgeon is appointed to an hospital, but the mortality greatly increases; inquiry is made, and it is found that he has neglected his duties. He is charged with

neglect, and acknowledges it. "But," he says, "come with me, and I will show you I have not been idle." He takes the authorities to his room, and shows them a freshly finished painting or a half-written book which he expects will make his fortune. No one questions whether such a person will be retained or dismissed.

For the charge of bringing forth no fruit is not the only one which the owner of the fig-tree brings against it. It also cumbered the ground, took up a place in his vineyard which might be more profitably used. It not only bore no fruit itself, but "sucked the soil's fertility" from wholesome and productive plants. It used up room and nourishment which another tree might have used for fruit-bearing. This tree had given promise, and because of its promising appearance had been set where it was—but it failed. And it reminds us of the guilt we incur when we engage to perform duties which nevertheless we neglect. Had we not professed a willingness to perform them, others would have been found to do them. Had we not thrust ourselves forward, or would we only stand aside and yield the duties to others, they would be performed; but by taking engagements upon us and not fulfilling them, we both omit our own part and prevent others from performing it: like a crowd idly gazing from the shore at a man drowning, and hindering the one eager to rescue who cannot make his way to the

water's edge through the idle mass. Have you never seen some one spoiling a piece of work which you were sure you could do well, but with which you cannot interfere because the other is the party engaged to do it? Far better that he were out of the way; but until he is discharged by a competent authority, he must be allowed, not only to spoil the work himself, but to prevent any one else from doing it well. The reason why no one interferes with your work is not always that it is perfectly satisfactory. You may blunder and weary, you may do your work in a perfunctory and slovenly way, but while you occupy the place, the better workman cannot interfere to mend matters.

It is a saddening but also a stimulating reflection, that many duties might be better performed were we out of the way. To many parents it must occur that their children would have been better provided for in an orphan hospital, sometimes even better clothed and fed, better instructed in religion, with a more worthy example to incite them to well-doing, and receiving a better start in life than they can do while their natural guardians are alive and engaged to perform duties which are almost wholly neglected. And in many directions in which our relations in life branch out, it may well shame us to look upon the dead barren twigs into which we send no sap, and which might be all beautified and bend-



ing under mellow fruit were some other enjoying the place that we occupy with our lifeless bulk. If others had had our advantages, is it not probable that more beneficial results would have appeared? If others had enjoyed the same parentage, the same thoughtful prayerful love watching over their early years, the same clear light regarding duty, the same encouragement to well-doing,—if others had received as fully as we of what is thoroughly beneficial in life, or what goes to form character and to make the conduct wholesome and helpful,—is it not likely that fruit of a rarer quality and of greater abundance would have appeared?

It is impossible that such waste of ground should be suffered forever in such a vineyard as this of the Parable. If we on whom certain duties are depending are the very persons who prevent these duties from being done, this is not a state of things which a wise God will allow. Indolence, distrust, anything which hinders us from working harmoniously with God, must be removed and is being removed from His dominion. Such things can only be suffered for a time, and do not belong to the eternal condition of things. Therefore God in His mercy warns us that all such obstructive dispositions must be abolished. Here Christ in His office of Saviour and Intercessor is represented as interposing between the owner and the barren tree: “Lord,” He says, “let it alone

this year also. Let me give it one chance more, let me do my utmost for it." This request is acceded to, but on the distinct understanding that this is a last chance. It is agreed on both sides that if fruit be not now borne, the end has come. There will be no more pleading. The spade will be thrown aside and the axe lifted. There is no hurry in the matter, but a distinct agreement—one thing or other must be done—either the fruit borne or the tree cut down. As it is said, "God does not pay on Saturdays, but at last He pays." His judgments are not weekly, but they are infallibly certain. Every delay He makes, He makes with a distinct understanding of what He means by it, of how long it is to be and of what will take place at the expiry of the term. There comes a time when even the tears of Christ will not save us; when even He can do no more than weep.

The Jews accordingly received their year of grace. Judgment was delayed for forty years; for a generation. Time was given for passions to die down, for prejudice to pass away, for reflection to be made on all that Christ had been and done. The tree was dug about and well cared for. Means never before used were now used. Preachers as zealous as the old prophets and with more telling words to utter held clearly before them the king they had disowned. The trees planted near them all began to yield fruit. In

fact, as every one sees, it was useless trying to do more to bring them to acknowledge Christ; nothing more could be done. And so the heavy hand of Rome which so long had been held back was at last allowed to fall, and the nation went to pieces under the blow.

But when the old tree is torn up by the storm, what chiefly astonishes us is to see that the mass below the ground has been almost as widespread as the branches above: that each branch and leafy twig that has waved in the air is represented by an unseen root or sucker below which has fed and sustained it; and so if you look below the surface through this period of grace, your eye lights upon the sustaining love of God, your ear discerns the regretful, dirge-like mourning that breathed through the words, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," the bitter disappointment and yearning that can only with deepest sorrow and pain give up hoping and that still repeats, "Oh that My people had hearkened unto Me, and Israel had walked in My ways! I would soon have subdued their enemies, and turned My hand against their adversaries."

This Parable, then, bears in it a strong encouragement that may well pervade and strengthen our whole life. For this vinedresser had not interceded for the tree unless he had thought it possible that fruit might yet be borne; and you may be sure the pains he spent on that tree would exceed all that he spent on the rest. You can

fancy him leaning on his spade and carefully studying it, thinking of it as he went home at sundown, talking it over with neighboring vine-dressers, and coming out early to try some fresh method, resolved that it should lose no chance of mending. And were our ear keen enough to hear the deliberations and judgments pronounced now in the spiritual world, might not some of us become aware that we ourselves were under discussion and that the time of our final probation had come; that methods were now being tried with us which, if they fail, cannot be renewed? If hitherto you have done little for God, and if lately the thought of your opportunities of doing good service has been borne in upon you, if your advantages have been strikingly increased, your position improved, and hindrances taken out of the way, then ought you not in reason to construe this into a renewed invitation on God's part that you should make up your mind at length to live for Him? Suppose you could overhear the remarks passed upon your condition by these unseen overseers, suppose you could overhear what is thought of your past and what is resolved regarding your future, have you no reason to believe that you would hear remarks very similar to those which were called forth by this tree from the persons who stood and considered it? If it be so, if you are now to be put on a final trial, then He who seeks and longs that you win is at

your side to give you every advantage, such arrangement of your worldly circumstances as is most likely to tell upon you for good, such influences brought to bear upon you as you must consciously resist if you are not to bring forth fruit, such promptings of conscience and present light about duty as you must shut your eyes to if you are not to see and obey. If this consideration and treatment of you is going on, and if indeed the main reason of your being in life at all is that it may go on, then are you not to think what may come of it, are you not to bestir yourself to some serious and thorough response to God's dealing? If you so bestir yourself, then you are certain of success. Christ does tend you. Much that He does may be offensive to you, much unintelligible; but believe in Him, frankly and heartily co-operate with Him; welcome His efforts in your behalf; consider how much fruit His own life bore, how, through neglect and contradiction of sinners, through unsettlement and poverty and at last suffering, He still served God's purpose. Consider how utterly His life gives the lie to all within you that would either say that life is easy, or that it is fruitless and empty and contemptible. Consider Him and His promise that His Spirit, which made Him what He was, shall pass into you, and take courage to live with Him and like Him. Believe that He means you well, believe that He understands human life and means to

make yours worthy, and that if you co-operate with Him, nothing can defeat you.

There is encouragement also for those who have long been striving to serve God. Do not despond about your own bad state and its many unfavorable symptoms. Do not learn to treat life carelessly, as if its duties and trials had no reference beyond the present time; do not treat this world as if Christ had never been in it and had not shown you how everlasting results may flow from a brief time spent among men and their sins and passions. Do not believe that you are left on earth to grope and stumble blind and forlorn to an uncertain termination, but abide in Christ and keep your mind occupied with His ways and seek His presence, until you feel sure that every day comes to you with opportunities of living as He did. It may seem very poor fruit such soil as you are planted in can produce, but leave that to Him; He knows the kind of fruit He seeks from your life; and, if it satisfies Him, it may satisfy you. Do not fancy that all is over with you, and that fruit is what once might have been, but now cannot be. Even out of the withered hopes that lie damp upon your heart and the comforts that have gradually fallen from about you and now lie dead and saddening all your life, your Lord can bring happiness and profit to you, can use these disappointments and griefs as nature uses the dead leaves of the autumn

to nourish and feed the spring and the coming harvest. Certainly this remains to us all to say : I may bring forth fruit to God, it is open to me to please and gratify Him, it is open to me to make my life worthy of the approval and commendation of Him compared to whose judgment the praise or blame of men is as the bluster of the wind that, once heard, dies out forever. Life may in other respects be sad and dreary ; I may be fixed in one cramped and narrow spot all my days, enlivened and stimulated by no change, the same familiar employments palling upon me more drearily every day ; I may have to stand out exposed to burning heat or chilling storms, and may long for shelter, for comfort, for ease, for pleasure, but the want of any or all of these ought not to make me think there is no object in my life, no good use I can put it to, no worthily compensating end it will serve. In the assurance of my Lord I mean to abide, that there still and always remains to me the possibility of doing God's will, and opportunity of satisfying His purpose with me.

## THE GREAT SUPPER.

LUKE xiv. 16-24.

THE occasion of this Parable is carefully explained by Luke. One Sabbath-day, a leading Pharisee of the metropolis had invited a large and apparently distinguished company to dinner; possibly the guests were invited on the express understanding that they would have an opportunity of conversing with Jesus more freely than they could in a public place; possibly Jesus was a casual guest, asked at the moment. At all events the innate authority which shone through His bearing and conversation at once disarmed His intended critics, and instead of a spirited debate they found themselves forming an audience to this dangerous teacher. It was strictly table-talk our Lord here indulged in. His remarks, though not calculated to make either host or guests feel quite at their ease, were seasonable. Perhaps His advice to guests that they should modestly take the lowest place is rendered less needful in our own society, in which any obtrusive assumption of precedence would be considered a breach of good manners. And yet there are still extant characters which by kindred vices become the bane of all genial and sociable inter-



course. There is the man who uses every dinner-table as an occasion for the exhibition of his own wit or knowledge or powers of conversation. There is the man who is uncomfortable and unhappy all the evening if he does not meet with full recognition of his importance. There is the woman who is offended if you ask her to sit at the same table with those whom she considers much her inferiors in station. There is the person who is always thinking of what is due by others to himself, never or rarely of what is due by him to others.

To His host, our Lord, as He looks round on the richly-clad and well-conditioned guests, remarks that his hospitality might be better expended on those who had more need of it. Our Lord does not mean to discountenance friendly gatherings, which are, have been, and always will be among the highest pleasures in life, but He means to warn against heartless and hollow civilities,—against asking people to your house whom you really don't care to see, but to whom you must return the doubtful favor they have shown you in giving you a similar invitation. Our Lord, that is to say, complains of what society itself is continually complaining of; that so much time, means, thought, and energy are spent on the giving and returning of formal civilities which every one knows to be hollow. Where a real advantage can be conferred by your hospitality, where the

comfort of a stranger can be secured, where innocent and exhilarating pleasure can be bestowed, where you can be the means of forming friendships useful and satisfactory to yourself and others,—in such cases be given to hospitality; but on every account emancipate yourself from the dreary, wasteful, resultless round of entertainments which are likely to be as distasteful and heartless to those who receive them as those of which they are the recompense were to yourself.

But this kind of talk began to touch the company somewhat too nearly, and one of them makes an unsuccessful attempt to put an end to the conversation by a pious remark that no one will be irreverent enough to criticise or throw over. The remark is skilful—sufficiently in the line of what had previously been said to warrant him in making it, sufficiently off the line to change the subject, and sufficiently solemn to prevent any from violently returning to the old subject. “Blessed,” he says, “is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God,”—a most undeniable and edifying assertion, and which, for the matter of it, might have fallen from the lips of our Lord Himself, but Pharisaic in this, that, under the guise of piety, it was intended to turn the conversation from what was personal and profitable to a vague generality which touched nobody. You can see the sanctimonious old hypocrite solemnly shaking

his head, and letting the words fall unctuously from his tongue. But with all our Lord's benignity and forbearance, there was one thing He could not stand, and that was cant. He therefore does not answer the man as if he had been a simple soul longing for communion with God, but utters a Parable to remind him and the rest that a verbal appreciation of the blessedness of the kingdom was often joined with an entire refusal to enter it. A person with less delicate edge on his teaching and less skill to manage a conversation, might have bluntly replied to the Pharisee, What avails it to extol with so much pious enthusiasm this blessedness, if all the while you yourself are rejecting it?

The Parable illustrates the difficulty of finding any to accept what all acknowledge to be desirable: the lack of all obtrusive eagerness to take the place next the host, when the host happens to be Divine; and the wisdom of making a feast not for the well-to-do, who will rather excuse themselves, but for the needy, who will accept the invitation with glad surprise.

Our Lord exposes the insincerity of the Messianic expectation which found utterance in such expressions as that of the sanctimonious guest, by exhibiting the actual treatment which was at the same time being given to God's invitation to the Messianic feast. He utters a Parable which shows how hard God finds it to furnish with guests a

table He has spread with the utmost bounty. He shows that notwithstanding first and second invitations proclamations of God's friendship and bounty by the prophets and by the Baptist, the Jews were so immersed in political and commercial schemes that they despised and ignored the happiness God had so carefully prepared for them. They professed to be waiting for the Messiah, but when He actually came and offered them places in His kingdom, they contemptuously declined. Of all those who never broke bread without exclaiming, "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God," scarcely one was found to take his place at the table God actually spread before them. To furnish His table with guests God had to pass from the first invited and call in the outcasts among the Jews themselves, and after ransacking the lanes and slums of the city, had to go far afield among the highways and hedges of the outlying Gentiles that His bounty might not be wasted.

The application of the Parable to our Lord's contemporaries is sufficiently obvious. It has also obvious applications to ourselves which may be briefly indicated. And as it is to the manner in which men deal with God's invitations that the Parable directs attention, rather than to the fact that the Messianic kingdom is suitably represented by a feast, it may be enough to say regarding this latter point, that those who actually enter

God's kingdom find all their cravings satisfied, all their necessities provided for; and that in the present person and work of Christ God's kingdom was open to men, and remains open now to us.

The feast being prepared, whom will God invite to partake of it? For admission to a feast is solely by invitation. You may have a strong desire to be at some entertainment which you know is to be given; you may have most urgent reasons for wishing to be there; your happiness for some time to come may, so far as you can judge, depend upon your presence; and yet you can do nothing but wait for an invitation. The idea of going unasked is not once thought of; your presence or absence depends entirely on the will of another person. If they wish your company, or think it advisable to ask you, *that* decides the matter. You may see invitations, which others have received, but you cannot beg, buy, or borrow these. Unless one comes to yourself, you remain outside, excluded from the company you crave, ignored by the set you long to be in, prevented from pursuing your most warmly cherished plan. The same rule applies to the feast of the Parable. There is a "not transferable" impressed on every invitation issued. It must come to yourself from God, or it is invalid and a forgery. If it were known that only three men in a generation were admitted to intimacy with God, and that all others were omitted, passed by, and

left in exclusion, with what envy would these three men be looked upon. Or if it were known that a small, indefinite number were chosen in each generation, and that for each of them it was settled at the age of thirty by some distinguishing mark appearing on their person, we should then feel how completely we were dependent on the will of God in this matter. Yet we are as dependent on His invitation as this would imply. If God has prepared nothing for you, what can you do? If God does not desire that you be provided for, if no place is set apart for you at this feast, if He has not had you in view in making it, what can you do to mend matters? Do not think of salvation as a thing *there*, ready for you, whenever you choose to go and take it. It depends on God's invitation whether any good awaits you. You have first to discover whether God in unmistakable words invites you or not.

Those to whom it was first intimated that the supper was ready, had previously been prepared for this announcement. They were the Jews the well-instructed, Messiah-expectant Jews. They were persons who might seem to be on friendly terms with the host, and had no appearance of destitution. We must look for their counterpart in men whose need of salvation does not lie on the surface, whose sins are not going before them to judgment, and crying out in the hearing of all, but who rather seem to be on

terms of amity with God, and have no difficulty in believing that they are invited to His banquet. That which exhibits the true character of these men is their *actual treatment of a present invitation*; not what they said about it, not the flattering terms in which they replied to the host, but their conduct when summoned to come now to the feast. It is this which marks off the real friend of God from him whose spurious devotion enables him to ejaculate, as he thinks of a future and heavenly state, "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God." We are all prepared to utter such an otiosed sentiment; but the pious contemplation of heavenly blessedness is one thing, the entrance upon such friendships and habits as make us capable of it is quite another thing. The man who provoked the Parable was not saying what he did not feel: his feeling was present, but it was merely sentimental, with no result in action.

The Parable gives three specimens of the grounds on which men refuse the invitation of God, and of the terms in which they couch their refusal. 1. The first says: "I have bought a piece of ground, and must needs go and see it. I pray thee have me excused." No doubt he had seen the ground before he bought it, but it was a much more interesting sight now. A piece of ground, very poor-looking in itself, becomes attractive to a new purchaser. He can now men-

tally divide it out and plan its crops or its buildings. This man of the Parable had not been of so much consequence in the world when he first accepted the invitation. He still sees the desirableness of maintaining friendship with the host ; but his invitation does not now seem so attractive as it did before he was a landowner. He endeavors, therefore, with a show of courtesy to set up an opposing necessity. It is not, he says, that he does not desire to accept the invitation, not at all ; the host will quite misconceive him if he thinks he is not dying to come ; but necessity compels him to look after his property. He must go and take it over, and make arrangements about its use. He is extremely sorry, but so it is.

The invitation of God comes inopportunately to the man who is enjoying the first pleasures of proprietorship. He feels himself to be a solid part of this world, and is disposed to resent anything which reminds him that there are claims more pressing than even those of his recent investment. It will now appear which possession the owner thinks most substantial and finds most attractive, the bit of land or the friendship of God. He tries to persuade himself he has a regard for God too, and is compelled for a little to defer the manifestation of that regard. These are ominous necessities indeed which grow up between a man and God, and prevent him from enjoying God's friendship. And yet do you not constantly find



men speaking of the *necessity* of postponing God's will and work to the world's business? Do not men on all hands betray that inwardly they put earthly possessions first, God second? They profess to be compelled to do so, and to be sorry they are compelled; and do not see that nothing compels them but their own likings and will.

2. The second refusal was worded: "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them. I pray thee have me excused." This man merely announces his intention, assuming that there can be no doubt of its propriety. However disappointed the host is, he must see that the guest's conduct is justifiable. This guest does not stay to explain the urgency; he does not even condescend to say that there is a necessity; simply states that he goes, as if every one must at once recognize the reasonableness of his conduct. He is so absorbed that he does not even perceive the claims the host has upon him.

Of how many men in their prime does this man stand as the representative; men so engrossed in the business or pursuits of the world that they positively do not know that God has any claims upon their time,—so busy in pushing forward mercantile or scientific or literary or political or military affairs, that it never once occurs to them that there are other objects for the sake of which these affairs should be for a time suspended. All men appreciate what con-

tributes to bodily comfort, to convenience of moving from place to place, to rapidity in attaining a competence; and those arts and skilful applications of science which are daily with increasing success contributing to these ends, come to be almost worshiped by us. There is a palpable utility which imparts a dignity to the cultivation of the arts which enlarge and beautify life, and few escape the temptation to ascribe to them even greater power than they possess. When we do choose them as our pursuit in life, and discover the real wonders they work, and the mysterious and apparently limitless powers that lie in them, we are fascinated. To check a man in the launching of some great undertaking which is to bring material advantage to a city or country, to recall him from the abstraction of deep research, or the anxiety of fine and prolonged experiment, to interrupt him in a calculation of some large financial scheme, to invite him to curtail the time he gives to business for the sake of entering more fully into the enjoyment of fellowship with God—this seems to many a man a mere impertinence, an absurdity bordering on madness. The objects for which men labor are to them so real and commanding that they do not see that they are required to justify an entire devotion of themselves to these objects. A man's life seems to be nobly spent in subduing the powers of nature to the use of his fellow-men; but these powers, how mys-

terious and beautiful soever they be, are but as the five yoke of oxen when compared with that closest intercourse with the God of nature to which we are invited. And as this man would have had more temper to manage his young oxen in the morning had he treated his host with proper respect, and put friendship before self-interest, so there is no one of us who will not make a better use of the powers of this world if he himself is inspired with the thoughts and purposes which spring from fellowship with God.

3. The third who refuses to go to the supper gives as his reason: "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come." These several grounds of refusal are instanced as illustrating that anything is considered sufficient ground, and as showing also the various engagements which occupy men to the exclusion of fellowship with God, rather than because each has some distinctive and significant feature. If it be supposed that this refusal is distinctive, then it may be said that it reminds us that pleasure as well as business prevents us from paying due regard to the appeals of God. Marriage, if not always really so, is at least symbolically joyful; and it seems to this man that the host takes quite the wrong time to invite him. So, with a greater harshness than the former decliners, he almost rudely refuses the invitation. Many feel as if God's invitations came at the wrong time. They

think God might stand aside for a little. The thought of perfect purity, of a life of consecration, of devotedness to the highest aims, of renunciation of all that is paltry and self-pleasing, comes inopportunately when they have just launched on a current that promises quiet domestic pleasure, and a happiness that tempts to forgetfulness of others' woes and wants.

The three refusals have this in common, that under a very thin disguise there lies a real indifference to the feast. They had better engagements elsewhere—more exciting, profitable, and pleasant than conversation with their professed friend. His kind intentions are nothing to them: whatever he can have provided for their entertainment is beneath their notice. They can apologize afterwards, but meanwhile they must attend to more important matters. Had they really liked his society and heartily honored him, they would have found it easy to go. The land would not have vanished before next day; the cattle would have been proved in time to get to the feast; and even the wife would not have been an insuperable difficulty. But any engagement was enough to compete with one they wished to decline. And the Parable is spoken that men may be warned and may see clearly how amidst considerable profession of friendship with God there may exist a real distaste for His society and His pleasures. If there is anything else to attend to,

it will receive our first attention. God is postponed to everything else. This fact, so obvious in the life of many of us, should let light in upon our true state of heart ; and it will let light in where such light is honestly desired. It is a severe Parable, saying very pointedly to many now as to this sanctimonious person who provoked it, *That* is your real estimate of communion with God : you talk a great deal about it, you extol spiritual pleasures, so that, to hear you, one would suppose you scarcely belonged to earth, but your life reveals a very different state of matters. Judging by your verbal acknowledgments of the excellence and infinite superiority of spiritual to worldly things one would expect to find you absorbed in the work of Christ, but your actions give the lie to your words, and prove them to be pitiful cant—phrases with which you unintentionally blind yourself to your real likings.

Judging, then, not from our words, not from the easy phrases that drop from our lips as readily as remarks about the weather, but judging from our life and actions, where are we to say that our real pleasures lie? What is it for which we will defer any engagement? what is it we never forget, never neglect, never find tedious and an unwelcome interruption? Let us know this ; for it is not our profession that we ought to be spiritual, nor our acknowledgment that we ought to love God that avails ; but what avails is our being

spiritual and our actually loving God above all. When we think of the kingdom of God as a future state in which all shall be assembled as to a family gathering in the quiet and cool of evening, it is easy to express desire to be present there. Who does not feel some desire to see face-to-face the real person of the Lord, and have leisure to scan the features of this Host to whom he is so intimately linked? Who does not desire to exchange thoughts with Him, and so to learn how personal and searching is the interest the Lord has taken in him? But these desires are apt to be merely sentimental, and before we trust them they must be tested by the actual use we now make of the access to Christ we already have.

The doom of those who reject God's invitation is plainly pronounced. They are passed by, and the offer is made to others. Paul, seeing this doom accomplished, said, "Through their fall—the fall of the Jews—salvation is come to the Gentiles." Does the threat that none of those who were bidden should taste of His supper seem by no means very terrible? Does it strike you as extravagant and grandiloquent to put such a threat in the form of a threat at all? And yet I suppose there are persons you so esteem that, if such a message came from them, you would feel that disgrace had fallen upon you, and that until you were justly reinstated in the goodwill and friendship of those persons, your life must be clouded

and full of bitterness. Is it less ignominious to treat God with disrespect, and less disastrous to be excluded from His favor? Suppose you were sure that this doom had been pronounced upon you, and that therefore it was quite vain for you to expect God's help or blessing in any matter you have to do with,—suppose you had the prospect of entering the world of spirits unaided and uncared for, and that while others were seen to and provided for by God, you were left to yourself,—suppose you had reason to know that God, who is slowest to take offense and never unjust, is offended with you, and henceforth renounces you, deleting your name from among His friends,—would this not affect you with shame? would it not at least move you to consider what just cause of offense you have given, and would it excite no anxiety; or is it all one to you whether there opens up before you an eternity full of brightness and hope, calculated to call out every high sentiment and all worthy activity in you, or one that is full of gloom, disappointment, and misery, the lot of lost, defeated, sunken, degraded souls?

The invitation, when despised by those to whom it was originally addressed, was conveyed to those who could least of all anticipate any such communication. The class of outcasts described in the Parable is recognizable at all times. They are those who seem to be beyond help and hope—the maimed, the blind, the vagrant, the destitute, the

criminal. Such descriptions are self-interpreting. Whoever finds himself in a wretched and abandoned condition is taught here that God invites him to His table. He who cannot discover in his condition one hopeful symptom; he who is crushed and defeated; he who has been maimed in the service of sin, and has laid himself down by the hedge-side, to let the busy stream of life run past without noticing him; he who is utterly weary and heart-broken, and knows not how he can ever be restored to virtuous and serviceable living—to him comes God's invitation to the utmost of His bounty. The servants were sent to invite promiscuously every one they found: bold sinners in the streets, secret and shamefaced sinners in the lanes, proud sinners in the highways, and woe-begone sinners by the hedges; wherever they found a man, wherever human life yet stirred the mass of filthy rags, *that* they were to bring to the feast.

Such persons were to be *compelled* to come in. The servants were not to let them away to dress themselves under promise of coming in an hour. They were to bring them as they stood or as they lay. They were to take no excuse, but were to "compel" them to come. They were to use the strongest persuasion in their power; to allow no shame, no sense of unworthiness, no fear of offending the host, no remembrance of wrongs done to the host, to deter them; but they were to use



authority, argument, entreaty, everything to move them; or doing less, they did less than their master's pleasure. They were not merely to walk along the highways with a placard, or to proclaim as they passed by that any who chose might go. They were to lay their hands on the men, and compel them to listen. They were to represent their master's cordiality and urgency. They were not to leave any in doubt as to how they would be received, and they were not to let any away with a mere promise to come. They were to bring them. And if the lame gave as an excuse that they could not go, or if the blind said they would have been glad to go had they been able to find their way, the servant was to become eyes to the blind and feet to the lame; he was not to think he had cleared his conscience by giving them the invitation, but was to see them inside the guest-chamber. Such is the freedom and such the urgency of the Gospel of Christ.

## THE LOST SHEEP AND LOST PIECE OF MONEY.

LUKE XV. 1-10.

THE heathen philosopher Seneca made a practise of dining with his slaves, and when challenged for an innovation so directly in the teeth of all customary proprieties and so offensive to the Roman mind, he defended himself by saying that he dined with some because they were worthy of his esteem, and with others that they might become so. The action and its defense were alike admirable, and read a salutary lesson to the aristocrats of Rome. But it was even a greater shock to the Pharisees, and, if possible, even more unaccountable, that Jesus should prefer the society of notorious sinners to their own irreproachable manners and decorous conversation. They were honestly surprised and nonplussed by His treatment of these abandoned characters. They could not understand why a teacher of holy life, instead of frowning upon the notoriously profligate, should show a preference for their society. Our Lord's explanation is ample and thorough. It was of extreme importance that His demeanor towards sinners should be made perfectly intelligible, and that its reasonableness

should be put beyond a doubt. He devotes, therefore, the three Parables recorded in this chapter to this purpose.

It is perhaps worth remarking that on one point He felt that no explanation was required. Even the Pharisees did not suspect Him of any sympathy with sin. These critics of His conduct had not failed to remark that in His presence the daring profanity and audacious license of wicked men were tamed. They could not but remark that into these doubtful companies He carried an influence that quite overmastered the habitual manners and tendencies of the degraded creatures among whom He so unostentatiously took His place. They never suspected Him of any desire to be initiated into the mysteries of crime, nor was any one blind enough to fancy He had some secret liking for the talk and experiences of the vicious. When Samuel Johnson, late one night, found a poor woman lying on the streets of London, exhausted with want, disease, and poverty, and carried her home on his back, and nursed her with all tenderness and sought to put her in a virtuous way of living, no one misconstrued his motives. It was seen to be the Christ-like act of a simple, great, and charitable nature. But while the contemporaries of our Lord did not suppose He had any personal relish for sin, they still held it to be an unaccountable if not blameworthy feature of

His conduct that He received sinners and ate with them. For as we sometimes find ourselves laying to a man's charge that which is his chief claim to our regard, and citing that as his weakness which in reality is his strength, so did the Pharisees and scribes bring against our Lord as a damning accusation that very habit which is His eternal praise: "This man receiveth sinners." The most desolate and broken soul cannot desire any better account of the Saviour's work than is thus given by those who were reading off the most obvious facts of His life.

Those who so narrowly criticised our Lord's conduct might have seen its reasonableness had they been able to look at it from another point of view. With equal surprise they might have exclaimed: "Sinners receive this man and eat with Him." Among them it was a new thing that the godly should consort with sinners; but surely it was equally novel that sinners should seek the company of One whose conversation was instinct with purity and breathed of heaven. Could the people recall many instances in which outcasts and profligates had been seen longing to talk with a man whose words were all of purity and righteousness? These dissolute and lawless characters could themselves have explained the change. They were attracted to Jesus because, together with unmistakable sanctity, and even somehow appearing as the chief feature of His sanctity, there

was an understanding of the sinner's position and a hopefulness about him which threw a hitherto unknown spell over them. Separate from sinners, as they had never before felt any one to be, He seemed to come closer to their heart by far than any other had come. He had a heart open to all their troubles. He saw them through and through, and yet showed no loathing, no scorn, no astonishment, no perplexity, no weariness. Instead of meeting them with upbraiding, and showing them all they had lost, He gave them immediate entrance into His own pure, deep, efficient love, and gladdened their hearts with a sense of what they yet had in Him.

Therefore men whose seared conscience felt no other touch, who had a ready scoff for every other form of holiness, admitted this new power and yielded to it. Old sinners broke down before Him, and with tears and simplicity as when they had sobbed out their first fault on their mother's bosom, repented of their weary life of sin. Men from whom the Roman lash could draw no word of confession; men whom society had branded as outcasts and who flung back on society a scorn as contemptuous as its own; men who had long since abandoned all belief in goodness, and who delighted in showing their disbelief, were not ashamed even in the public streets, to own to Him their sin and to supplicate His mercy. Women whose vanity and light-heartedness had led them

to self-loathing and despair, who forced a ghastly gaiety from hearts that lay cold and heavy as stone in their breasts, found to their astonishment that Christ did not shrink from them, but spoke to them with a tenderness and a hope which were new sounds to them. The disheartened, the polluted, the ruined, the degraded came to Him, because in Him they found an inexhaustible compassion. He did not give advice; He did not warn; He did not send them away with minute directions for godly living;—there were plenty who could do that—He *received* them, opened to them His heart, and gave them to feel through their whole being that they were loved and thought of by this highest and purest of persons.

The contrast between this new attitude of a holy person towards the sinner and that to which men had commonly been accustomed, has been finely described in the following words: “He who thought most seriously of the disease held it to be curable; while those who thought less seriously of it pronounced it incurable. Those who loved their race a little made war to the knife against its enemies and oppressors; He who loved it so much as to die for it, made overtures of peace to them. The half-just judge punished the convicted criminal; the thoroughly just Judge offered him forgiveness. Perfect justice here appears to take the very course which would be taken by injustice.”

It is this, then, that calls for explanation. And it is explained by our Lord in three Parables, each of which illustrates the fact that a more active interest in any possession is aroused by the very circumstance that it is lost. The sheep that is lost is not on that account disregarded by the shepherd but receives for the time greater attention than those which remain in the fold. The piece of money that has gone amissing becomes on that very account of greater immediate importance to the woman than all she has safe in her jar in the cupboard. If one of a family turns out ill, it is a small mitigation that all the rest turn out well; it is after the lost the parent's heart persistently goes. So is it with God. The very circumstance that men have strayed from Him evokes in Him a more manifest and active solicitude in their behalf. The attitude of God and of Christ towards sinners is reduced to the great principle, that anything which is lost and may be regained exercises our thought more and calls out a more solicitous regard than a thing of equal value which rests securely in our possession.

This is the principle which these Parables are intended to illustrate: that with God as with men that which is lost occupies, for the time and until restored, more of His thought and provokes clearer and larger manifestations of His love than that which has not been lost or is already restored.

The figures used for the purpose of illustration must not be pushed too far. They are not so much images of our state as instances of the application of one common principle. They are instances of lost articles; that is all. It is merely accidental that there is a resemblance between the silly sheep that heedlessly nibbles the sweet grass that lies before it and so crops its way from spot to spot of pasture till it is utterly lost, and the man who looks only to present gratification and so strays on with the same foolish thoughtlessness and unconsciousness of danger, and is only awakened to see how near akin thoughtlessness is to wickedness by finding himself involved in inextricable difficulties and threatened with danger of the most alarming kind. In like manner it may be said that we resemble lost coin that has fallen out of circulation and is lying unused and being gradually tarnished, defaced, and buried in dust; for we too have been issued with the image of our Maker upon us, but are gradually suffering it to be defaced and are dropping aside from all serviceable living. But the points of the comparison for the sake of which these illustrative instances are introduced are simply the lostness of the sheep, the money, and ourselves alike; the consequent concentration of attention on what is lost; and the joy of finding it again.

1. The first point, then, suggested by these



Parables is, that God suffers loss in every sinner that departs from Him. To the Pharisaic mind this was a new light on the character of God. The Pharisee himself trusted little to tenderness, much to rigid law. Naturally he thought of God also as standing upon His rights, enforcing His will by compulsion, and with equanimity punishing and driving into permanent exile those who have strayed from Him. It is a revelation to them to hear that the lostness of the sinner is God's loss; that God suffers more than the sinner in the separation. For God loves the sinner and this love is wounded, whereas the sinner has no love for God that can be wounded by separation. The silly sheep is quite satisfied with its state, while the shepherd's heart beats fast with anxiety about its possible fate. It is not the son but the mother whose hair turns gray with slow anguish as she marks the increasing frequency with which he is absent from her fireside, and how he is becoming lost to her. So it is God who suffers, and not the heartless sinner, who, without a thought of the wounds he is inflicting, goes his own wretched way and courts the destruction which Christ died to save him from. All the broken-heartedness of parents who year by year watch the failure of all their efforts to lead some misguided child to well-doing; all the crushing anguish of wives who see their husbands slowly hardening in vice and sinking out of reach

of their love; all the varied misery that love must endure in this sinful world, is after all but the reflection of what Infinite Love suffers in sympathy with every sinner who spurns it and chooses death. Look at the sorrow of God in Christ, and say whether the loss God suffers in your separation from Him is true or feigned.

This was what the Pharisees had wholly left out of account, that God loves men and mourns over every ill that befalls them. And this is what we find it so hard to believe. It is only very slowly we come to believe even in human love. With difficulty we believe that there are persons to whom it would give real pleasure to make a sacrifice for us. How impossible is it for a child to understand the love his parent has for him. How few of us conceived anything of the tenderness and intensity and persistence and self-sacrifice of parental love, till we ourselves grew up and had it interpreted to us by our own feelings. In some of us, grief for lost friends or parents has been embittered by the thought of what we might and would have done for them, had we only sooner learned what we have since discovered of their love for us. Are none of us preparing for ourselves a similar remorse by our neglect of that Love which is the true spring of all other affection, and itself greater than all?

These Parables thus bring us face to face with the most significant and fertile of all realities,

God's love for us. This love encompasses you whether you will or no. Love never asks leave; it cannot; it enters like sunshine, and often where it seems much out of place. You may destroy all love to God in your own soul, but you cannot destroy His love for you. It persists, because it is love. It waits patiently for requital; it humbles itself to be often slighted, often misconstrued, often refused. Can it be true that God loves you; that you yourself are connected by this most fruitful of ties to the eternal God? Surely there is no question that may more worthily engage the attention. It will not do for a man to persuade himself he is honorable and right-minded, if he is making no account of this expenditure of love upon him. This is no question of casuistry that plain men need not trouble their heads about. It is no question of doctrine which a man may believe or disbelieve, and still remain sound at heart. It is a question regarding your conduct towards a Person, a question that touches what lies deepest in our life and character.

2. Secondly, these Parables suggest that the very fact of our being lost excites action of a specially tender kind toward us. God does not console Himself for our loss by the fellowship of those who have constantly loved Him. He does not call new creatures into being and so fill up the blank we have made by straying from Him. He is not a Sovereign who has no personal knowl.

edge of His subjects, nor an employer of labor who can always get a fresh hand to fill an emptied post: He is rather a shepherd who knows His sheep one by one, a Father who loves His children individually. He would rather restore the most abandoned sinner than blot him from his place to substitute an archangel. Love is personal and settles upon individuals. It is not all the same to God if some other person is saved while you are not.

“Thou art as much His care as if beside  
Nor man nor angel lived in heaven or earth.”

When men sin, therefore, and fall into difficulties, God cannot remain indifferent or quiescent. Interference of a direct and special kind becomes necessary. The normal relations being disturbed, and man becoming helpless by the disturbance, it falls to God to restore matters. A new set of ideas and dealings is brought into play. So long as things go smoothly and men by nature love God and seek to do His will, there is no anxiety, no meeting of emergencies by unexpected effort, hidden resources, costly sacrifice. But when sin brings into view all that is tragic, and when utter destruction seems to be man's appointed destiny, there is called into exercise the deepest tenderness, the utmost power of the Divine nature. Here where the profoundest feeling of God is concerned, where His connection with His own chil-

dren is threatened, Divinity is stirred to its utmost.

This appears, among other things, in the spontaneity and persistence of the search God institutes for the lost. The shepherd who misses one of his flock does not sit down by the ninety and nine in the pasture, but straightway goes in search of the lost. He does not expect that it will seek him; he goes after it. He does not expect to meet it coming home to him, so that if he had only waited and left it to itself, it would have found its own way back. On the contrary, he knows the recovery of the sheep depends wholly on himself and he prepares himself for trouble, provocation, risk. On him must fall the burden of finding it, of devising means of rescue and of bringing it back to the fold. Yet men sometimes seem to suppose that God is not alive to their dangers, but needs to be aroused to take a livelier interest in their condition and to help them in their strivings against evil. He is thought of as sitting coldly watching our passionate and almost despairing struggles to break away from evil and make our way back to a pure and helpful life; as if He were saying, I will let this sinner learn what it is to have strayed from Me. But it is not so: God is as truly beforehand with the sinner as the shepherd with the sheep. The initiative is God's; and all that you desire or do in the way of return to righteousness is prompted by Him. He has

already sufficiently shown that He is alive to the emergency and that no trouble is too great, no sacrifice too great, while there is a possibility of saving the human soul.

God's search is also persistent. The woman of the Parable sweeps out every dusty corner; she shakes out every article of clothing; she lifts boxes that have not been lifted for years; she carefully searches drawers where she knows the coin cannot be; she reads the face of every one who has come near her house for a month; she exhausts every possibility of finding her piece of money. Possibly she required it to make up a sum for a purchase. Certainly God needs us for some end He has in view. This is not our whole history, that with immense outlay of Divine resources we are restored to permanent rectitude. There must be much beyond, and for this God prepares us now. The experiences of earth, however exalted, do not exhaust the eventfulness of our eternal life. Therefore God seeks us with earnestness as if we were necessary not only to His love but to His purposes. He makes diligent search. He leaves no stone unturned. With active, intelligent, unwearied search, He strives to win the sinner to purity and love. Christ astonished men on earth by the company into which He found His way, and by the affection with which He spoke to low and worthless people; and so does He still, by means less observable but equally efficient,

seek to win men to the recognition of His love and of all the good He makes possible. The shepherd sought "until he found" his sheep; the woman swept diligently "until she found" her coin. But while God's search is infinitely more persistent, it may be baffled by the cold indifference, the resolute badness of the sinner.

3. The third point illustrated by these Parables is the exceeding joy consequent on the restoration of the sinner. "Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance." The joy is greater, because the effort to bring it about has been greater, and because for a time the result has been in suspense, so that when the end is attained there is a sense of clear gain. The joy of success is proportioned to the difficulty, the doubtfulness of attaining it. All the hazards and sacrifices of the search are repaid by the recovery of the lost. The value of the unfallen soul may intrinsically be greater than the value of the redeemed; but the joy is proportioned, not to the value of the article, but to the amount of anxiety that has been spent upon it. So that Christ virtually says to the Pharisees: "You murmur at Me; but if you were in sympathy with heaven, you would rejoice with Me. You need no repentance,—at least you think so; and for this very reason I seek to attract those who do. Their state is admittedly precarious, and to win them will be clear gain to the kingdom of

heaven. The finding is an intenser joy than the keeping safe, because the loss has been actually felt and is now relieved, the pang of separation has been actually endured and is now swallowed up in the joy of restoration."

To the sinner then, these Parables say, It is your unspeakably happy privilege to give God joy. There is no joy comparable to the joy of successful love; of love, that is to say, not only recognized and returned, but which succeeds in making the object of it as happy as it desires, and does so after many repulses and misunderstandings and hazards. This is God's greatest joy. When God succeeds in securing the happiness,—the inward purity and rectitude, and therefore the happiness,—of any one who has been estranged from Him, there is joy in heaven. What can more worthily give joy to intelligent beings than the increase of goodness? God's joy is the unutterable joy of the parent who for many years has been anxiously watching his son's growth, his leanings, his temptations, his resolutions, his declensions, his alienations of spirit, and at length sees proof that the lad is wholly sound at heart, that he has chosen the better part and thrown off all vice that clung to him; that he is bent now upon a pure and honorable life, and with his own soul hates the thought of evil; that he has finally abjured the allurements that tempted and bound him formerly, and has in himself that deep principle and those



wise and generous dispositions which will guide him in all circumstances and in all companies. This joy you have it in your power to give to God. There is a joy which no one but yourself can excite in God, a joy over your repentance, over your return to good; a joy therefore which none but yourself has the humble glory of stirring in the mind of God.

In this joy the angels are represented as sharing. Their experience of the blessedness of life with God, gives them sympathy with all who enter that life. They know the happiness that lies before every one who yields himself to God's purpose and to God's love, and therefore they rejoice. And if it be true that the conversion of one soul be so reasonable a ground of joy to those who are merely spectators, what unspeakable gladness ought it to bring to those who themselves experience it? Have you ever had such happiness that you would deem it reasonable that all heaven should rejoice with you in it? Yet there is such happiness open to you. Uninteresting, solitary, monotonous, and unobserved as your life may seem, it is, if there be truth in these words of the Lord, an object of intensest interest to God and angels. With all its evils, its fears, its misery, it may be lifted to so true a harmony with the ever-living God, that those pure and discerning spirits who see it cannot forbear rejoicing over it with well-grounded satisfaction.

If God with all heaven is thus in sympathy with us, defeated in our defeat, triumphing in our victory; if the cause of love and moral order is one throughout the universe, we have every encouragement to play our part well. It is no short and easy passage of arms we are called to; we are wearied and often overcome by the constant accompaniment of sin, weakness, and folly in all we do; but in all this evil and conflict there is material for victory and joy. Are you weighted by nature with a poor craven spirit, a vain selfish heart, sordid or gross passions, a feeble inconstant will, a nature that often causes shame? Humbly recognize all this as what you are actually called to master; do not waste your energies envying those who have a better nature and an easier task, but face the conflict that actually awaits you and carry into it the assurance that every stroke for the right and every defeat of evil you accomplish has an echo of the truest kind in heaven. Remember the greater joy God has in the painful, difficult, penitential return of a lost soul than in the easy righteousness of the naturally pure.

## THE PRODIGAL SON.

LUKE XV. 11-32.

IN the Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Piece of Money, our Lord has already shown that the very circumstance that men are lost inevitably attracts towards them the greater solicitude on God's part; that so far from their notoriously bad character and gross breach of all law, human and Divine, putting them beyond God's love, this really only provokes a more manifest and touching exhibition of God's love. In this Parable He repeats this lesson, but adds another figure to the *dramatis personæ*, a figure which represents the objecting Pharisees and scribes, and in which they might see the unreasonableness and hatefulness of the spirit which could find fault with the unquestioning welcome and festal reception of the returning penitent. There is also another difference between the Parables. The two former bring into great prominence the loss which God sustains in the lapse and destruction of the sinner, the suffering which His love necessarily endures in being prevented from achieving the happiness of its object. In this Parable of the Prodigal, so much is said of the wretchedness to which the

sinner is reduced, that while the central figure is still the father, our attention is strongly directed towards that which was entirely absent from the other Parables, the experience and change of mind in the lost sinner himself. It is, however, to be borne in mind that this description of the sinner's misery is given still to give point and justification to what might otherwise seem the extravagant joy of the father. Had the son been absent for a year or two on a mercantile mission as his father's agent, and were he now returning successful, this exultation would be out of place. The miserable plight of the prodigal is detailed to justify the recoil of the father's feeling from long-suppressed love, compassionate anxiety, and longing to overflowing, unrestrained rejoicing.

The few strokes in which the career of the prodigal is sketched have approved themselves at the bar of universal experience, and have become part and parcel of the imagery in which all of us clothe our thoughts. It has, too, been kept alive in the minds of men by the unhappy circumstance that the career here depicted is so often actually reproduced in the lives of young men who start with every advantage and comfort, and who perish miserably in some distant colony, or in a few years run through their health, and come home only to die in sorrow and shame.

The beginning is the same in all cases; an incapacity to find the fullest enjoyment in God's

love, God's presence, and God's ways. The son grows weary of the father's home ; he desires his goods, but not his presence ; he wishes to be his own master, believing that he is cramped and straitened by goodness, and that liberty to do evil is the true emancipation. There is nothing in sin that affects us with a keener sense of degradation than the youthful folly that runs through it all, the inexperienced and thoughtless fancy that unless we sin we have not freedom, and the sense that God would be more to us were He less in Himself. He is too good for us to be quite at home in His presence. His holiness shames us and discomfords us. His presence ceases to be the most grateful, the most enjoyable, the easiest. What answer do you get when you ask yourself, Should I be satisfied were God to give me as my own what would make me independent of Him ? Were I sure of life, of power to spend and enjoy it as I pleased, with no interference of punishment or remonstrance from God, would this satisfy me ? Or would it be itself a terrible punishment to me to be cast forth from God, even though I had provision for all my future ? Were communion with God denied me, would this really make a difference to me, would my life seem a blank ? would this take the soul out of all my hopes, all my plans, all my enjoyments ? Should I feel as a homeless outcast suddenly ejected into an undesired, bleak, blank world, my heart unable to rest

in anything, but turning ever back to the Father I had lost ?

When the heart is thus alienated, God does not desire a constrained bodily service. He does not compel us to abide with Him. If our real desire is for His portion, and not for Himself, He gives us our desire. He does not treat us as if we had no capacity of choice. He does not save us, whether we will or no. But neither does He let us go without regret or into oblivion. The father by dismissing his son does not help to lose him ; but foreseeing that nothing but an experience of the world's emptiness can bring him to appreciate the home and love of his father, he sadly sends him to this painful school. He sees him away and turns into his house, and who can tell the broken-hearted anguish with which in secret he pictures to himself the probable career of his loved child ? What servant on the farm does not well understand the sudden lack of interest in all the work, the absent look as schemes of improvement are detailed to him, the many signs that reveal that his heart is with his lost son, and that all else is matter of indifference to him ? But the son, for his part, after the first pang, exults in the freedom he has gained, wantonly puts the greatest distance between his father and himself, does not provide for a return home, nor dreams of needing further help, but boldly launches on the world sufficient for himself. It is thus that in the pride of

life when health is unbroken, and the world untried, we reckon only on a life of success and gratification, gather to us all our means and powers of enjoyment, and accept guidance solely from our own casual impulses or shortsighted longings, without a thought of the pain we are inflicting on Him whose love persistently follows us, and without a thought of the misery we are courting.

How soon the scene shifts, and how utterly! The gay youth who was foremost in every revel, whose bright face and confident bearing seemed the very embodiment of the pride of life, whose wealth gave him command of every form of luxurious living, and to whom no earthly pleasure was unfamiliar—look at him now, blackened with starvation and filth, clothed in the rags that others have thrown out, noticed only by those who gaze with astonishment at him as one who is too sunken to be helped. But to none does he look so miserable as to himself. In his mind alone is there visible the full contrast between what he is and what he was; between what he is and what he might have been. The love he might have enjoyed, the noble uses he might have served, the expansion of his life under the wise enterprise of his father, the growing influence and respect, the share in the real work and permanent rewards of life that might have been his,—all this gone beyond his reach, and in its place

cold and filth, hunger and nakedness, neglect and desolate bitterness of soul.

Against how many of us does this picture lift up its parable ! For he is not the only prodigal who in riotous pleasure or vain display brings himself to beggary ; but he is the prodigal who in any way wastes the powers and means God gave him to effect substantial good and results that might always be looked on with pleasure. It seems a matter of no importance, and gives us not a thought that we are living for ourselves ; we think that living for God is a height of consecration that some may aspire to, but that it is no law of life for all ; but we come to find that it is just this which makes the difference, and that all we have done on any other footing had far better have been left undone. We have been laboriously carting stones into a moss which quietly absorbs all our labor, and shows absolutely no result. If we have spent our portion, our talents, our opportunities, our life, in striving to please ourselves,—if we have not made common cause and partnership with God, and been content to have our individual portion merged in His,—then manifestly we have as thoroughly alienated ourselves and our portion from God as if we had spent it on riotous living.

Indeed the riotous livers always seem to have more to say for themselves than the more respectable self-pleasers. They say or they feel,



There is a great untried sphere, a world that promises enjoyment, away in that direction. Let us try this promising freedom, let us make experiment of that life that lies beyond law and restraint; we shall at least know more. Yes, as John Ruskin says, "You now know the habits of swine and the taste of husks; do you think your father could not have taught you to know better habits and pleasanter tastes, if you had stayed in his house; and that the knowledge you have lost would not have been more, as well as sweeter, than that you have gained?" "No one ever gets wiser by doing wrong, nor stronger. You will get wiser and stronger only by doing right, whether forced or not; the prime, the one need is to do *that*, under whatever compulsion, till you can do it without compulsion."

And this is not a mere critical remark made upon us from without, by one who has different tastes from ourselves; it is a truth that asserts itself in the experience of every prodigal. The famine comes, and the husks won't satisfy. They may keep down the gnawing pangs of hunger, they may stay the appetite for the hour, but they do not nourish. Take any pleasure or pursuit that is ungodly, and you know that this is all it does. It passes the time, it interests and engages you, it stays an appetite; but your nature is not fed, the deepest parts of your nature are unfilled; yourself in that which is most yourself,

is impoverished. You are not growing in any fitness for the future, you are not gaining mastery of your spirit, you are not enlarging in your love of goodness. Do you wish proof of this? Have you never wished that your nature did not require anything better than the world provides? As this poor prodigal lying by the swine's trough may sometimes have wished that he could fatten on that food as they did, so it is not a wholly unknown desire among us to wish that we were a shade liker the beasts, that every part of our nature might be satisfied with that which only satisfies the lower parts of it, that it were not *wrong* to enjoy the pleasures of sin, and that God had made us for no higher ends than our own weak and depraved hearts aspire to. But our natures will not remake themselves. They are made for God, and nowhere else can we find eventually aught but famine. You may as well try to feed a horse upon carrion or a lion upon straw. "Man liveth by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." We must have assurance of God's presence with us, and of His love. He must speak to us words of approbation and encouragement, we must be on terms of the truest affection with Him. We live through all our being when the words and sentiments that come straight and true from the heart of God Himself come home to our hearts, when He manifests Himself to us,—gives us to understand, as with

His own lips, what no other can tell us of His love,—conveys to us the inward assurance that He is ours, and that we are His for evermore.

If you have learned that after all enjoyment of this world, there is a something more you must have if enjoyment is to last ; if you are not yet wholly citizens of this world, but have still some feelings of the alien, some longings, however faint, after another kind of home, some indications, however slight, that this is not filling and feeding you, that this may do for a while, but would be misery if forever,—if you feel, in short, your need of God,—then look and listen to His Incarnate Word. Christ is sent to speak these words of everlasting life to you, to win you back to your true home and Father, to be the channel through which the whole fulness of God's love is poured into your famishing spirits, to refresh and invigorate you with undying hope, to loosen the hands that are feely clutching the foul husks, and fill them with the bread that cometh from heaven.

The return of the prodigal was perhaps not prompted by the very highest of motives. What high motives could you expect in a man who had lived for his own pleasure, and was now lying starving? But who would be saved if he had to show a repentance void of all selfishness? The chief reason why men turn to God is in the great majority of cases the same as that which prompted the prodigal's return. The prodigal could not

make a better of it ; we too have tried everything else, and been disappointed. We do not try God until convinced that nothing else will serve our turn. Health gives way, or the spirit is broken, or hope baffled, or one way or other we find the world is not going to be the paradise we expected. The world sees and says this ; it sneers at conversion as if it were unreal, because it is so often the result of disappointment with the world. God sees and says it too ; but receives the returning sinner, and in the reception a better mind is produced in him, and his selfishness broken.

Besides, there was even in this compulsory return that belief in the father's love which condones all offenses. There was the instinctive undying feeling that a parent is still a parent, and will receive when others cast us out. You have, I dare say, read the experience of the great French philosopher Diderot. "The first few years of my life in Paris had been rather irregular, my behavior was enough to irritate my father, without there being any need to make it worse by exaggeration. Still calumny was not wanting. People told him—well, what did they not tell him ? An opportunity for going to see him presented itself. I did not give it two thoughts. I set out full of confidence in his goodness. I thought that he would see me, that I should throw myself into his arms, that both of us should shed tears, and that all would be forgotten. I thought

rightly." So thought the prodigal. And whatever his motives were, his action was right. He put himself again within reach of his father's love, and that love received him without question, exulting in the ample opportunity of uttering itself. It had opportunity now of helping its pitiable object, of doing *all* for the still loved son. This was no time for inquiry as to why he had come. Here he was, and in need. That is enough for true love.

Nothing can surpass the pathos of the meeting of father and son. While the prodigal was "yet a great way off," his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. It is as if he had been watching for him night and day; as when a mother has lost a son, she will start at every ring or footstep, thinking it may perhaps be he. Every feature, every peculiarity of gait, every line of his figure was imprinted on the father's heart, so that long before another eye could recognize him, the father's heart had welcomed the son. He saw him, and had compassion, simultaneously; there was no hesitation to be fought against, no pondering whether he should not harden himself against this heartless profligate; but as soon as his eyes rested on him, all his sorrow passed away, the sun of his life shone out again. The rags that would have disguised him from any other eye could not hide him from the father; the rags

and misery that would have tempted others to spurn him as a hopeless, abandoned creature, drew forth the father's love. He *ran* to meet him, everything else neglected, his own dignity out of the question; he cares not to require a seemly submission on his son's part that the servants may understand he is justified in receiving him. There is no attempt to impress upon the son a sense of his demerit, nothing done to make sure that he has a sufficient sense of guilt to justify pardon. The reason of the father's receiving him is not that; is not that the son has a sufficient sense of anything, but only that the father loves him, and the son is now within reach of the father, will suffer him now to show his love. And therefore the father runs as if it were all on his side the blessing were, as if it were he who was to win favors from his son; he runs and falls on his neck, overcome with joy, his heart bounding with happiness, his soul satisfied, his life complete. No words can express the first welcome, the father cannot find language to utter the fullness of his heart; but in that eager embrace, in that kiss of love and peace, the prodigal knows himself a son still, as surely and more vehemently loved by his father than if he had never sinned.

This is a picture of the reception the returning sinner receives. You may have wasted the best years of your life in selfish gratification, without a thought of serving God; you may have indulged

in sins that fill you with self-loathing ; you may have sunk to a state of heart that you would be ashamed to lay bare to the most generous and charitable of men ; you may painfully feel that you have nothing to offer to God but the worthless dregs of a wasted life ; you may be conscious that even your heart is not given to God as it ought, and that through the whole of your repentance your original selfishness is running ; but only put yourself into God's hands as you are, and as this father was not hindered by the foul and sour rags of his son who came to him from among the swine, but fell on his neck, overcome by joy, so will you find in God no revulsion, but an immediate and hearty welcome that will cause you to rejoice in His love. You need not fear that you are to be put through some preparatory discipline, lodged in some sad and dreary moral quarantine till some of the loathsomeness and defilement of sin be worn off you. You will not be charged with your sins and reminded of your folly. All that will be left to yourself, and what God does is to meet you with the tenderest love, and to do everything to give you assurance of it, and wipe out the past. The father does everything to assure the son of his immediate reinstatement as his son,—everything to relieve him from fear, from want, from pain, from sadness ; and whatever God must give us, if we are to be delivered from the same sensations, we are war-

ranted in expecting. The father cannot do enough for the son; would like him at this hour of return to tell him of every least way in which help could be given him. It is this that God longs for, that we give Him the opportunity of blessing us, that we learn to trust in His love, and knowing that all else has failed us, believe that it will prove sufficient. And because it is love we have to do with, no one need fear that having been received he will yet make no progress in all that constitutes man's real growth and happiness; nor need any one suppose that they who are received are suffered to remain just what they were. They have been received because they are loved, and the love of God is not inactive nor ineffective, but does most certainly continue to watch over its objects, and to confer the highest gifts upon them. Whatever more complete severance from old habits and desires is needed, whatever persistence in well-doing, whatever deepening repentance, whatever growth in knowing and loving the Father is requisite,—all this will most certainly be given.

And now in contrast to this joy of God in the returning sinner, our Lord sets the cold-hearted jealousy of the Pharisaically righteous man. He not only justifies His own conduct by showing how the father acts, but condemns the objections of the Pharisees by holding up to them in this elder brother a mirror in which they may see



their own hateful likeness. The Pharisees had murmured against our Lord, "This man receiveth sinners;" He shows them an elder brother saying of his father, "This man receiveth a sinner," and leaves them to draw their own conclusion. Every touch in the description brings out some ungenial, servile, grudging, and envious feature of his character. He was "in the fields" when his brother came; too busy with his industrious and useful labors to share in his father's earnest watching for the prodigal's return; not perceiving from his mercenary point of view that he might have pleased his father immeasurably more by going after and recovering his lost brother than by an ostentatious and punctilious performance of his own private duties; not even having such insight into his father's heart as would have enabled him to guess the one occurrence that could have given his father such gladness; not even observing that by contrasting his own life of toil with his brother's riotous living, he betrays his own secret liking for that, and proves that his service had been the heavy, unacceptable task of one who is not in sympathy with either the object of the work or him who set him to it. Thus may a man, after years of respectable living, disclose a heart alien from God, and out of sympathy with Him; thus may he disclose that his whole past life has been unloving and self-seeking.

But as the father was patient and loving with the younger brother, so is he with the elder. He answers his bitter words and audacious reproaches in a tone of surprised and pained yet gentle and encouraging remonstrance: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine." Why grudge thy brother this hour of gladness, when the calm and even joy of abundant life has all along been thine? I have never given thee a kid, because all I have is thine. We have mistaken one another. I thought that to be with me from day to day, sharing my thoughts, my plans, my joy, my prosperity, would be enough for you. As I am satisfied in my work, in increasing good, and in thy love, I judged that you also were finding it your joy to be with me, my partner in all things. But now I see you have been serving as a slave, doing your work not for its sake, not for mine, but for reward.

There is sufficient Pharisaism in each of us to justify the application of this to ourselves. They who have long served God with care and diligence and yet find their life a hard struggle, with few bright passages, many disappointments, and never joy such as the penitent at once enters into, naturally feel some soreness that one step should bring a life-long sinner abreast of them. You may have been striving all your days to be useful, and making great sacrifices to further what you believe to be the cause of God, and yet you

cannot point to any success; but suddenly a man converted yesterday takes your place, and all things seem to shape themselves to his hand, and the field that was a heart-break to you is fertile to him. You have denied yourself every pleasure that you might know the happiness of communion with God, and you have not known it, but you see a banquet spread in God's presence for him who has till this hour been delighting in sin. You have had neither the riotous living nor the fatted calf. You have gone among the abandoned and neglected, and striven to enlighten and lift them; you have done violence to your own feelings that you might be helpful to others; and, so far as you can see, nothing has come of it. But another man who has lived irregularly, who has not prepared himself for the work, who is untaught, imprudent, unsatisfactory, has the immediate joy of winning souls to God. Have you not been tempted to say, "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency"? All this may be needful to convince you that it is not service that wins God's love; that His love is with you now, and that your acceptance of it will make all that has seemed to you grievous to be light and happy. Take refuge from all failure and disappointment in the words, "Son, I am ever with thee, and all that I have is thine." Learn to find your joy in Him, and you will be unable to think of any reward.

## THE UNJUST STEWARD.

LUKE xvi. 1-13.

THE occasion, and therefore the intention, of the last Parables we considered—those of the preceding chapter—were obvious. They formed our Lord's defense of His solicitude for great sinners. The occasion and intention of the Parables in this chapter are not so obvious. But it would appear that the same crowd was yet around Him. There were Pharisees still hanging about, as the fourteenth verse shows. But what our Lord had now to say was not addressed directly to them, as the three preceding Parables had been, but "to His disciples"; and very probably it was for the sake of the publicans and rich men among these disciples that His teaching took the peculiar cast it now did. These publicans and sinners had suddenly been made aware of the fact that the fraud, extortion, violence, and luxurious living which had made them outcasts from the purest Jewish society had rather attracted towards them an exceptional solicitude on God's part. The place they still held in God's love had been vividly set before them. The value He set upon them, the eagerness of His desire to recover

them, the glad welcome and full forgiveness with which they were met, had been brought home to their hearts with irresistible force. Being but men, and men whose character had been sapped by constant familiarity with crime, and whose views of all transactions were determined by their own selfish habits, it was natural that they should be tempted to think less severely of their sin than was right. It is true that nothing so cleanses the heart as the knowledge of God's love. To be overcome by God's love is the only effectual cleansing and bar against sin. But as yet the holiness of God's love had not been signalized in the cross, and there was a danger, as there is even now a danger, of the penitent luxuriating in the love of God, while oblivious that this love is consumingly holy. It is at last the holiness of God's love that gives it its power; at last we come to see that His love and His holiness are one and the same thing; but at first we are tempted to forget that the love of God burns to make us holy as Himself.

Apparently, therefore, though not certainly, these Parables were spoken that the publicans might distinctly understand how their ill-gotten gains were to be used. They were to be taught that, though their past is forgiven, they have a duty to do with the gains they have made. And they are addressed as men thoroughly versed in all the ways of monied men, wide awake to appre-

ciate hard work, vigilance, enterprise, and promptitude. And the aim of this first Parable is to impress on them the necessity of carrying over with them into the kingdom of God the qualities which had made them successful in the kingdom of mammon. They are to use the world's opportunities, and especially what we significantly call "means," with the same vigor and sagacity, but for higher ends; they are so to use their opportunities that, when they terminate, they shall have served to provide a competence for eternity.

The figure or character through whom this lesson is conveyed is one with which they were perfectly familiar and had daily transactions. Indeed, it is not unlikely that when the unjust steward was described, significant glances would be exchanged by some of the crowd who had good reason to know how close to reality the description lay. He was a steward; not a farm steward, or a house steward, but, in modern language, an agent, factor, or "man of business." He was apparently much employed in the receipt of rents, the tenants paying to the landlord not a regular sum of money, but a proportion of the harvest; and apparently, also, it depended on the tenant himself to say truthfully, subject no doubt to the inspection of the steward, what the crop of each year yielded, and how much was due to the landlord as his proportion. Each tenant gave in, it seems, a bill to the steward stating the amount as his debt to the

landlord, as his rent due ; so that it lay between the tenant and the steward to be true or to impose upon the landlord. The landlord would make it the steward's interest to be watchful and faithful, but there might yet be some collusion between the steward and the tenants. They might agree to state the crop as less than it had been, and therefore the landlord's proportion as less. And in this case, as the Parable also shows, the landlord had no redress. He had, in the first place, no direct means of informing himself of the real amount of the harvest in the olive yards or corn lands ; and even if, as in the case before us, some interested party informed him of the fraud that was being practised upon him, he had no redress ; for it seems to have been established by law that what the steward did the landlord did. There was no legal redress against a steward's infidelity, no legal means of recovering from the tenants what had been kept back by the steward's sanction.

When this steward of the Parable was called to give an account of his stewardship, he at once saw that it was at least quite in vain to think of talking his employer over, so that he might still be retained in his service. Without a thought of idle lamentation he at once faces the question, what was to be done when discharged. A life of luxury had unfitted him for manual labor ; he had spoiled his chance of getting any other such situation as he now held ; and he who had been

regarded with greater dread than his master could not bring his mind to begging his bread. He sees at once the difficulty of his position, and, displaying here a business-like promptitude, sets himself to devise some scheme for extricating himself. The stewardship would be his no longer; it was already slipping through his fingers, but out of this fragment of stewardship that remained to him he resolved to make for himself a competent provision. While his master was laying to his charge one defalcation after another, his quick apprehension was taking in every element in his position; and undismayed by the ruin that stared him in the face, he held his sagacity so completely at command that he lighted on a solution of his difficulty. As his employer came to the last item in his indictment, and was pronouncing his dismissal, the subtle and active and self-possessed steward was saying in himself, "I have it"; "I see what to do." And he was confident that he had resolved aright; there is no suspicious flurry in his dealing with his lord's debtors, but only the speed which he knew he must use if his scheme was to be of any avail. One after another of the debtors of his lord was delighted by having a large part of his debt remitted to him. They cannot but feel most grateful for something like the gift of half a year's income; and the steward at once sees that he has secured the gratitude and goodwill of some well-to-do



men, who in turn will stand by him. The plan was, of course, thoroughly unprincipled and dishonest. It was simply stealing, taking out of his master's pocket, and banking the stolen money in the houses of these new friends. Yet the plan was admirably ingenious. There could not indeed have been any other extrication from his difficulty so entirely devoid of evil consequences to himself, so completely furnishing him with all that he aimed at. Had he perpetrated a direct theft, the law could have pursued him; but he acted still as steward, so that what he did must hold as law, and his lord had no redress. So felicitous was the device, that the landlord, though himself the loser by it, cannot withhold his admiration of this parting proof his steward had given him of his ready-wittedness. He had humor enough to enjoy the man's cleverness, candor enough to praise his prudence. "His lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely."

It is perhaps scarcely necessary to observe that it is merely the wisdom, the practical sagacity, the *savoir faire* of the steward that is commended to our attention and imitation. A bad thing may be well done. The most admirable qualities—industry, perseverance, bravery, quickness—may serve to accomplish a wicked as well as a righteous purpose. Few can withhold a tribute of applause from the forger who successfully copies a very difficult bank-note, or elabor-

ates a professedly medieval document so as to deceive even the experts. No one commends the morality of David when he played the madman at Gath, and scrabbled on the gate, but who has not smiled at his skill in meeting the occasion, in overreaching all his enemies, and making them serve him by the simple device of hiding the brightest intellect of the age under the vacant, silly stare of the idiot?

The wisdom of the unjust steward, which we are invited to admire, appeared mainly in his business-like apprehension of the actual situation in which he was placed, and his sagacity and promptitude in making the most of it. He looked the facts in the face. He did not buoy himself up with delusive hopes. He did not waste his brief opportunity in idle expectations. He did not fool himself by thinking, "I'll never need any other home than the one I now have," but recognizing that he would soon be turned out of his present home and employment, and knowing that nothing is more desirable to a man out of a situation than a friend's house where he can be quite at home, he takes steps to provide this for himself. He manfully faced the inevitable, and this was his salvation. The ability to do so is a great part of what is known as a strong character. It is a great part of that wisdom of the children of this world, which surpasses the wisdom of the children of light. It is this that makes the successful general,

the trusted statesman, the skilful man of business. To be able to distinguish between what we would wish to be the case, and what actually is the case ; to be able to brush aside all that blinds, and look steadily at realities—this is the beginning of practical wisdom. The wise man may, for example, ardently desire that his son should enter a certain profession, but he will not allow this desire to blind him to the qualities which unfit the lad for it ; he will not fight against fate.

By holding up for our imitation this style of man, our Lord suggests to us to inquire whether we are thus apprehending the situation. The children of this world have a clear idea of what they aim at, and they steadily and consistently pursue their aims. Their aim may be wholly “ of this world ; ” but they are not distracted by desiring one thing, while they profess to be desiring another. They make everything subserve their actual purpose, and do not disguise the facts. Are we as clear-sighted and as single-eyed ? Here is one large fact, for example, regarding our condition in this world. We are stewards who must shortly give account of our stewardship. Our opportunities are rapidly narrowing down. We should have had a very short and strong term to apply to this steward of the Parable, if he had made light of the message his lord sent him,—if he had said to himself, “ I have been so long my own master, not interfered with, allowed to do as

I like, and live comfortably, that I don't believe I am a steward. I am called a steward, but that is merely a title. If my lord does come,—though I do not believe he will,—it will be all right. He has always allowed me to do as I please, and I do not believe in this calling to account." Our friend of the Parable was no such fool. He knew how the case actually stood; he had a very lenient master, but he himself was but a steward.

Let us also then be clear in our minds whether we are stewards or masters; whether we are to stay here for ever, or must shortly go hence and find another home; whether we are ourselves supreme, or whether we can be called to account. Let us face the facts of our existence here, and understand the terms on which we live in this world. If we are stewards, set here to act justly, and faithfully to use for higher interest than our own whatever is in our power, then let us recognize that it is quite in vain for us to think of working any other principle. You might as well build a house on the understanding that never more will there be either wind or rain. Nature pays no respect to your understandings, but acts out her own laws without warning and without apology. You do not alter facts by hiding your eyes like the ostrich. You are called upon to assert your manhood by ascertaining what are the facts and laws of human life, and by frankly accepting them, knowing that they not only are

inexorable, but are also the best for you. If we do not ascertain the very terms on which we are living, and using what we use, the judgment we must pronounce upon ourselves is certainly that we are dishonest, and fools into the bargain.

But our Lord makes a special application of the example of the steward: "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that, when it fails, they may receive you into everlasting habitations." The steward made use of his departing power over his master's goods with such skill and effect, that when this power was taken from him he found himself welcomed into comfortable houses. You, says our Lord, ought to make such use of your opportunities, and especially of your share of the unrighteous mammon, that, when it fails you, and you cease to have any power over it, you may find yourselves welcomed into everlasting habitations. Doubtless this is a Parable specially for rich men, specially for those whose opportunities are considerable, who may be called stewards as having manifestly a responsibility to God on the one hand, and to men of inferior station on the other. The Parable is full of encouragement to such. It reminds them that the opportunity given them by being rich and influential is no slight one, that the power of wealth does not terminate with this world, that they need not greedily and fearfully try to get the utmost selfish enjoyment out of their money while they

have it, because it must soon be beyond their power ; but, on the contrary, that they may so use it as to secure eternal comfort. They can so invest it that the interest shall be paid them as regularly in the world to come as here. They may, in short, be eternally the better for being rich men in this world. The *love* of money is the root of all evil, but the possession of it is an opportunity of much good.

It need scarcely be said that, if money is to serve this eternal purpose, it must be invested with some better feelings than the mere selfish foresight of the steward. And here lies the difficulty ; a man may have love enough to give away a little, but he who has great wealth needs great love. It is like every other great opportunity, it needs some greatness in the man to use it greatly. At the same time it may be questioned whether in our day there is not just rather too much said against doing good for the sake of reward. The selfishness which buys an eternal inheritance at the price of great earthly advantages is not so very common a failing that much need be said against it. And, to say the least, the selfishness that can sacrifice money and earthly comforts for the sake of future and heavenly happiness is a nobler thing and a much better thing for the community than the selfishness which spends on display and pleasure without a thought of the future, or hoards with a

view to satisfy the vulgar ambition of being rich, or without any view at all.

But although this Parable was spoken to rich men, and for their special good, we have all more or less of the mammon of unrighteousness. *Mammon* is just the Syriac word for money, and it is called "unrighteous" or "unjust," because those to whom our Lord was speaking had made their money by injustice. It was as little their own as the unjust steward's was. The steward was unjust because he had not regarded himself as a steward; and in so far as we have forgotten this fundamental circumstance, we also are unjust. We may not have consciously wronged any man or defrauded any; but if we have omitted to consider what was due to God and man, the likelihood is we have more money than we have a right to. The name, indeed, "unrighteous mammon," is sometimes sweepingly applied to all wealth and material advantages, because there is a feeling that the whole system of trade, commerce, and social life is inextricably permeated with fraudulent practises and iniquitous customs—so permeated that no man can be altogether free, or is at all likely to be altogether free, from all guilt in this matter. Take any coin out of your pocket and make it tell its history, the hands it has been in, the things it has paid for, the transactions it has assisted, and you would be inclined to fling it away as contaminated and filthy. But

that coin is a mere emblem of all that comes to you through the ordinary channels of trade, and suggests to you the pollution of the whole social condition. The clothes you wear, the food you eat, the house you live in, the money you are asked to invest, have all a history which will not bear scrutiny. Oppression, greed, and fraud serve you every day. Whether you will or not you are made partakers of other men's sins. You may be thankful if your hands are not soiled by any stain that you have wittingly incurred ; but even so, you must ask, what compensation can I make for the unrighteousness which cleaves to mammon ? how am I to use it now, seeing I have it ?

Our Lord says, "You are to make friends with it who may receive you into everlasting habitations." You are so to use your opportunities that when your present stewardship is over you may not be turned out in the cold and to beggary, but may have secured friends who will give you a welcome to the eternal world. It is the same view of the connection of this world and the next which our Lord gives in His picture of the last judgment, when He says, "Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these, ye have done it unto Me." Those whom we have done most good to are, as a rule, those whom we have most loved ; and what better welcome to a new world, what more grateful guidance in its ways could we desire than that of those whom here



on earth we have loved most dearly? Can you promise yourselves any better reward than to meet the loving recognition and welcome of those who have experienced your kindness: to be received by those to whom you have willingly sacrificed money, time, opportunities of serving yourself? The parents whose closing years you watched and sheltered at the sacrifice of the opportunities of your own youth, the children for whom you have toiled, the friend or relative whose long sickness you brightened and retarded by unwearied affection, the acquaintance you kept from poverty by timely intervention, the lad whose whole life you lifted to a higher level by giving him the first step—all those whom you have so loved here that your service of them has been ungrudging and unthought of—these are they who will receive you into everlasting habitations.

But if any one staggers at such a reading of the Parable, there is no necessity that the "friends" be considered as persons. The word "friends" is used only for the sake of keeping up the figure introduced by the Parable, and may be legitimately applied to anything on which you spend yourself, and which you should like to renew acquaintance with in eternity. It is possible, this Parable reminds us, so to spend the time of our stewardship here that we shall hereafter live upon the happy results of what we have here done. The happy idea of the steward was to spend what

was left in his hands, not on himself, but on those with whom he would have to do after he was ousted from office. It was this which showed his business capacity. An ordinary rogue would merely have exacted more from his master's debtors and decamped with the whole. But far deeper was the plan of this astute individual; he would not eat his seed-corn in this rough style. The little he could make out of the few remaining transactions he could do for his master, he handed over to others, knowing that their friendship and good-will would return him a hundred-fold. And you may do the same. Your life you may either spend or invest. You may use it either as seed or you may devour it. You may so live that death will close all and shut you out into outer darkness, or you may so live that death shall usher you into an everlasting home, peopled with familiar faces that recognize and reassure you, and show you that in substance eternity is not so very different from time, and lead you to and assign to you your exact position in the eternal world and your real place among men.

These brilliant and memorable apophthegms which form a kind of appendix to the Parable can be only briefly alluded to. The Parable is forgotten in the momentous reality it has served to set before our minds; and the great law is enounced, "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is un-

just in the least is unjust also in much." Here are two great truths suggested to us: 1st, That we are here in this world merely on trial, and serving our apprenticeship; and 2d, That it is our fidelity that is tried, not so much whether we have done great or little things, but whether we have shown the spirit which above all else a steward should show—fidelity to the interests entrusted to him. The two verses following, in which this is applied, may best be illustrated by familiar figures. "If," says our Lord, "ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust that which is real?" He considers us all in this world as children busy with mere playthings and toys, though so profoundly in earnest. But looking at children so engaged you can perfectly see the character of each. Although the actual things they are doing are of no moment or reality, although, with a frankness and penetration not given to their elders, they know they are but playing, yet each is exhibiting the very qualities which will afterwards make or mar him, the selfish greed and fraud of one child being as patent as the guileless open-handedness of the other. To the watchful parent these games that are forgotten in the night's sleep, these buildings which as soon as complete are swept away to make room for others, are as thorough a revelation of the character of the child as affairs of state and compli-

cated transactions are of the grown man. And if the parent sees a grasping selfishness in his child, or a domineering inconsiderateness of every one but himself, as he plays at buying and selling, building and visiting, he knows that these same qualities will come out in the real work of life, and will unfit their possessor for the best work, and prevent him from honorable and generous conduct, and all the highest functions and duties of life. So our Lord, observant of the dispositions we are showing as we deal with the shadowy objects and passing events of this seeming substantial world, marks us off as fit or unfit to be entrusted with what is real and abiding. If this man shows such greed for the gold he knows he must in a few years leave, will he not show a keener, intenser selfishness in regard to what is abiding? If he can trample on other people's rights for the sake of a pound or two, how can he be trusted to deal with what is infinitely more valuable? If here in a world where mistakes are not final, and which is destined to be burned up with all the traces of evil that are in it,—if in a world which, after all, is a mere card-house, or in which we are apprentices learning the use of our tools, and busy with work which, if we spoil, we do no irreparable harm,—if here we display incorrigible negligence and incapacity to keep a high aim and a good model before us, who would be so foolish as to let us loose among eternal

matters, things of abiding importance, and in which mistake and carelessness and infidelity are irreparable?

“And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man’s, who shall give you that which is your own?” A merchant sees among his clerks one whose look and bearing are prepossessing, and he thinks that by and by this lad might possibly make a good partner; he watches him, but he finds him gradually degenerating into slipshod ways of doing his work, coming down late in the mornings, and showing no zeal for the growth of the business, and so the thought grows in his mind, “If he is not faithful in that which is another man’s, how can I give him the business as his own?” I can’t hand over my business to one who will squander what I have spent my life in accumulating; to one who has not sufficient liking for work to give himself heartily to it, or sufficient sense of honor to do it heartily whether he likes it or no. Much as I should like to lift him out of a subordinate situation, I cannot do so. Thus are determined the commercial and social prospects of many an unconscious youth, and thus are determined the eternal prospects of many a heedless servant of God, who little thinks that the Master’s eye is upon him, and that by hasting to be rich he is making himself eternally poor, and by slackness in God’s service is ruining his own future.

## DIVES AND LAZARUS.

LUKE XVI. 19-31.

THE Parable of the Unjust Steward was spoken for the purpose of encouraging rich men to make a right use of their wealth, as well as for the sake of reminding all Christians that the qualities which give success in the world and constitute practical wisdom are very much required in the kingdom of God. But the Pharisees, who were rich, and who under a show of godliness and piety kept a very firm hold on their money, laughed at the novel investment which our Lord proposed.

In our day the views of Christ regarding the distribution of wealth are seriously discussed by political economists, and no one ventures to deride His suggestion. There are still, however, double-dyed Pharisees, who with decorous solemnity and without a shadow of a smile listen to our Lord's recommendations, but listen also without the slightest intention of allowing them any practical force, without one thought of giving them effect in their own life. The Pharisee who smiled incredulously in our Lord's face, and expressed pity for His ignorance of the world,

was no match for our modern Pharisee, who can persuade himself he gives our Lord a reverent hearing though he does not dream of obeying Him.

The satirical and mocking observations which began to fly round the crowd when the former Parable was closed, induced our Lord to expose still more plainly the folly of the Pharisees and rich men. They lived in the comfortable creed that wealth was a manifest sign, if not the manifest sign, of God's favor, while disease and poverty were the results of sin either in the sufferer or in his parents, a creed which had just truth enough in it to give it life and make it pernicious. They believed that the man who was wealthy here would be wealthy in the world to come, and that God could not but esteem that which commanded the admiration of the well-washed and decorous Pharisee. They had, to their own perfect satisfaction, reconciled the love of God and the love of money. They laughed at our Lord, therefore, when He told them that God and mammon were irreconcilable, and that to be rich and honored in this world was no sign whatever of riches and honor in the world to come. Our Lord, therefore, argues no further with them, but draws aside for a moment the curtain that hides the world of spirits and discloses to their view the after history of two men, one of whom had been opu-

lent and powerful, the other nothing. He shows them what becomes of many highly respectable citizens, and what is frequently the result of the kind of life they chiefly admired. He takes them into the unseen world and gives them to understand that—

“Many there be who fill the highest place,  
Kings upon earth, who here like swine shall bide,  
Leaving but scorn and horror in their trace.”

The first figure our Lord sets before us in the Parable is intended as a mirror to the Pharisees. He is not intended to be depicted as a monstrous specimen of humanity or luxurious living. We do not read that his wealth had been unrighteously acquired. No doubtful speculations, no far too clever financing, no transactions generally condemned, are charged against him. He was simply a rich man, who had made his money in the usual way. Neither was he a miser who could not bear to spend what he had made; on the contrary, he liked to see his friends enjoying themselves at his expense. Had he been notoriously selfish and uncharitable, his gate would never have been chosen as the asylum of the beggar. Indeed, this circumstance, that Lazarus was day after day laid there, points rather to a character for such Pharisaic almsgiving as would maintain his reputation as an observer of the law; for those who were careful enough to carry the



beggar out in the morning would certainly set him where he would be pretty sure of being fed. The rich man did not refuse to have so loathsome an object at his gate, did not refuse to have his pleasure somewhat spoilt by the sickening sight, did not order his servants to drive the disgusting creature off his doorstep. Neither is it said that the man was a sensualist, curious in sauces and wines, knowing how everything should be cooked and in what season and with what relish it should be eaten. Not at all: he had money and liked to live pleasantly and brightly. He wore good clothes; not tissue of silver like Herod, nor anything that made him stared at in the streets, but merely, like fifty other rich men in his town, good linen next his skin and seemly purple over it. It is, in short, to his condition and not to his character our attention is in the first place directed. His character is shown by and by; but if we would receive the Parable in its full force, we must not anticipate its conclusion, but suffer ourselves to be led to it step by step. And this first step is to set before us a man surrounded by all the comforts of life and enjoying them to the full.

In striking contrast to this affluent, easy, brilliant life is set the other extreme of the human condition. And here, too, nothing as yet is said of the character of Lazarus; it is only intended to paint vividly external circumstances as squalid,

disgusting, and pitiable, as those of the rich Pharisee were enviable and glittering. While the gaily appareled guests throng into the mansion, while the sounds of mirth and dancing attract the passers-by, and the brilliant lights shed a radiance over all within, Lazarus lies through the weary hours in the outer darkness under the sweeping, chilling rain, waiting for the scraps that the hungriest slave casts out. Within, the Pharisee is receiving the flatteries of a hundred of his clients, and is wrapped round with all that nurses self-complacency ; at his gate lies a helpless heap, a distorted wreck of a man that the dogs mistake for a carcass thrown out to them, and that men hurry past with a shudder. It is a contrast such as our own streets continually present, and if anything you have yourselves seen of the extremes of comfort and discomfort can add another touch to this picture, you are welcome to see remembered reality shining through the Parable.

There are some pictures so constructed that when the spectator is thoroughly impressed with the scene before him, a spring is touched, the picture turns on a pivot and exposes on its reverse side that which completes the intended impression. This picture is constructed on similar principles. The festive Pharisee and the diseased beggar filling the eye, the picture is in a moment reversed, and the Pharisee is seen dropped out of all comfort and affluence, craving a drop of water as a

boon he has no means of procuring, while Lazarus is lifted to the pinnacle of human sufficiency and glorified above all earthly magnificence. There is something intentionally horrifying in the suddenness of the contrast. Fresh from his luxurious ease, Dives is in torments; quicker than a troop of bandits strip a traveler, is he stripped of all the inexhaustible equipment for comfortable living which had characterized him in life. In the suddenness, completeness, and terror of the contrast, it is comparable to that which passes under a brilliant southern sky where nature has been prodigal of her beauties, when there is but one moment's murmur, and the earth opens, pours out its flood of fire, and the fruitful land lies a scorched and sterile waste.

It need scarcely be said that this is merely a pictorial or figurative representation. Disembodied spirits have not eyes, fingers, tongues, voices. But the impression conveyed to the reader is strictly true, that a man's condition in this life may be reversed in the world to come. The truth our Lord desired in the first place to enforce was, that what is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God—that while men hurry past Lazarus with sickening revulsion and seek the company of the luxurious Dives in his well-appointed house, it is from Dives that God turns with loathing. This is not at once made apparent, but in the ordinary course of things

this judgment of God finds its counterpart in actual events and circumstances. And it is a pity that we should be so little able to enter into and sympathize with God's judgments; that our admiration should be so much spent upon rank, talent, wealth, success and prosperity. The man who invents a machine or makes a discovery which will facilitate business operations or add to the conveniences of life is at once raised to a pinnacle of fame; the author of a brilliant novel or the leader of a political party can scarcely make his way through applauding crowds. And it seems ungracious to turn the other side of the picture, and show their rank and place in a world where rank and place are determined solely by character. Yet the fact is that all things that make the greatest show in the world, wealth and power and genius, are the mere instruments with which character works, and are useful or hurtful according as the motive that wields them is good or evil. Let us learn then to esteem character, that it may not be said of us also, that what is highly esteemed by us is abomination in God's sight. It is of the essence of Pharisaism to be deceived by appearances, to have its judgment arrested on the outside and the surface, to be satisfied if the manners are good and the outward conduct respectable. It is weak and Pharisaic to be taken in by what is not of the essence of the man, and may be changed with circumstances, and must be left be-

hind at death. And it is this way of judging by the outsides and accidents of things, that prepares those tremendous reversals of human judgment exemplified in the Parable. If men were now grouped and ranked according to their spiritual and moral qualities, how often would rags take precedence of purple, and the outcast from under the hedge be counted more valuable for all eternal purposes than the well-housed and respectable citizen.

On the other hand, when tempted to murmur at the rougher portions of your lot, when you begin to look upon your misfortunes as punishment driving you from God, when you suffer your outward circumstances to regulate your inward peace, and find it hard to believe in the love of God when it sends you no better physicians than dogs, no ampler provision than crumbs from a rich man's table, remember Lazarus, and learn that the outward circumstances of this life is no index by which you may read the relation you hold to God ; that you may have one value in this world, another in the world to come ; that here outward circumstances are the training of saints, there the unmistakable indication of the spiritual condition, sinners there being the only sufferers.

If the Parable, however, merely exhibited the sudden and shocking reversal of human judgments and alteration of human conditions, it might be open to the charge often brought against it,

that it is a mere condemnation of wealthy men as wealthy and a defense of poverty. But the Parable at once proceeds to show on what the reversal of human judgment is founded—it goes on to show what the *character* of the rich man had been, what was the moral element and principle which ran through and determined his life upon earth. “Son, remember,” says Abraham to him, “remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things.” That is to say, if you desired equality with Lazarus in this world of spirits, you should have laid the foundation for it in giving him equality with you in your lifetime. Had you made friends with the unrighteous mammon which you so abundantly possessed, you would have been anxiously expected and welcomed by Lazarus and all those you blessed. Had you used your wealth as God’s steward for the use of God’s suffering creatures, you would now be enjoying pleasures greater than ever you experienced on earth. You beg for the friendship of Lazarus now, and entreat his kindly offices ; but you had the means of making him your friend while on earth. He is now beyond reach of your good things and friendship, and you are beyond reach of his. It is you yourself who allowed the contrast between you and Lazarus to abide, and it does abide. “Remember,” look back on your earthly life, reflect upon its opportunities and the way you used them, and you

will understand the origin and the justice of your present condition ; you will recognize that it is yourself who have fixed this yawning chasm between you and all permanent joy. You did not bridge the chasm between you in life—you did not leave your splendor to sit by his side, to hold his racking, weary head, to drive off the dogs and make him feel that at least in one human breast he had an asylum—you did not even send your servants to bring him in to an outhouse to lie among your cattle—you had everything that he needed and you left him in his need—you did not inquire into his necessities, nor penetrate through the rags and stench and poverty to the humanity they encased—you did not own him as a brother, and in anticipation of his lying in Abraham's bosom at the banquet of eternal bliss, take him in to yourself—you stood aloof and separated yourself from him, and that separation abides. Had you shared with him on earth, you would have shared with him now.

This is no doubt a pretty hard lesson to learn. And I believe those will feel its hardness most who have most desire to learn it ; who have candor enough and integrity of purpose enough to look straight at our Lord as He utters this counsel, and to feel that if they are to maintain a conscience void of offense they must be clear in their own minds as to the use they make of money and advantages. It is startling, too, to

find that the destiny of Dives was determined by his conduct towards this one poor man ; little as he thought of him, it was this powerless creature who could not even crawl into his path and force attention, who was exercising a more determining influence on his future than any of those who thronged his banqueting rooms and discussed with him all his plans and new devices of money-making or money-spending. What one person is it who holds this relation to our life ; perhaps as little thought of by us as Lazarus by Dives, and yet truly determining what we are to be and to have in eternity? The man whose wants you relieve sullenly, almost angrily ; the man whose too frequently recurring necessities you resent and spurn ; the person who crossed your path when you were too much occupied with your own joys to observe his face of starvation or disease ; such persons, and they whose claims you now refuse to look at for a moment, are determining your eternal condition.

But "beside all this"—the thing you ask is impossible. It is, in the first place, *just* that there should be this reversal of your condition ; but supposing that Lazarus were willing to forget the long wretched hours he spent at your gate, or supposing that his experience of pain made him sensitive to yours and anxious to relieve it, the thing *cannot* be done. This too is an essential part of the Parable. The results pro-



duced by character and a life-long habit cannot be expunged in the easy way suggested by Dives. The consequences of a selfish life of pleasure cannot be reversed as soon as they begin to be uncomfortable and distressing. If you take the wrong turning at the entrance to a mountain pass, you may emerge very near your friend who has taken the right one, but with a yawning gulf between that no human agility can leap—the only way is to go right back and follow the path he has taken, and if it is too late to go back, if the night has fallen and the mist closed in around you, no beseeching of the inexorable hills will repair your error. So a life of easy careless selfishness leads to a moral condition, a state of heart and of lot, from which no sudden leap can bring a man into the company and condition of those who have passed through long years of purifying pain and patient endurance that have tested every fiber of their character.

It is a grave charge indeed that we are each of us entrusted with—to determine for ourselves the eternity in which we are to live. And are we to expect that this can be well done without thought, care, conflict, all that can prove us men and bring out our manhood? Does any one resent being called upon to be in earnest and to make this life an ideal and a noble life for himself? Does any one object to this life being a *real* trial of men, fitted to determine and actually

determining what they really are?—Surely no right-minded person would shrink from a test that is real, that goes deep enough to search the very roots of evil and of good in us.

One would naturally expect that the Parable would close at this point. The doom of the selfish pleasure-seeker, of the man who does not use the means in his power to help the needy, has been clearly shown. It has been shown that if Pharisees on earth deride the proposal to serve God only and not mammon at all, the Pharisee who has left earth is in no laughing mood, is convinced of the justice of his doom and the impossibility of relief. And one would suppose this left no more to be said. But if no more had been said, the Pharisees, ever ready to justify themselves, would have said: This is a mere fancy sketch, spoken under provocation for the sake of alarming us. If things were as He represents them to be, some courteous ghost would blab it out—we should not be left by our father Abraham to glide on to such a doom, unstayed and unwarned. Anticipating such evasions, our Lord appends the pathetic supplication of Dives: “If *I* am past redemption, save my brethren; if no relief can reach me in this place of torment, hinder them from a similar doom.” And this request is introduced merely for the sake of bringing out that already all needed warning is given, and that the proposed additional warning would have no

effect whatever—that is to say, the Pharisees are without excuse if they continue their attempts to make the best of both worlds.

The statement of the Parable, however, to the effect that those who disregard Moses and the Prophets would equally disregard the appearance of a dead friend, is one which at first seems open to question. Who has not often longed to lift the veil and see for a little the actual condition of the dead? Who has not felt as if it would be so much easier to believe if we could but for one hour see? Who has not been ready to say with these Pharisees: Why not end all this doubt, all this plague of skepticism, all this brutality and worldliness, by sending back from among the dead some messengers who might be identified, and who might plainly tell us what they know, and allow us to cross-examine them? Could they be better employed? And if faith is so desirable, why is not everything done that can be done to give us faith? If there is a spiritual world in which it is so important that we believe, why are we not put in direct communication with it so that it would become as real to us as France or China or any country of whose existence we have no doubt, although we have never seen it? Is it possible that this world and a world so utterly different can be in so close a connection, as if separated only by a paper screen through which a man may any moment fall, and that yet we

should so little know what passes in that world? Is it possible that that world can be filled with friends of our own, and yet not one of them whispers us a single word, no more than if there were no such world at all? Is it possible that men who are to-day fully occupied with this world, following its fashion and leaving the world of retribution to sober, religious people, may to-morrow find themselves in that world? And if so, why does not nature herself cry out to warn us from our ruin? Why do not the spirits of the dead return and command us to hold back?

Such feelings are natural, but they are misleading. The rich man's brethren were heedless of the unseen world, not because they did not believe that any future state awaited them, but because this world's pleasures absorbed their interest. It was a profound moral change they needed, and for effecting such a change, "Moses and the Prophets," the continuous revelation of God and His holiness in the past, was a much more powerful and appropriate instrument than an apparition. By such a messenger from the dead as the rich man proposed—supposing his message could be authenticated—our ideas of what lies beyond the veil might be altered, and fear might lead us to adapt our conduct to the revealed future; but could our character be thus changed? No revelation of punishment awaiting the evil-doer could avail to make us different in

heart, or could unfix our real inward affections from sensual and worldly objects, and fix them upon God and what is spiritual and holy. Only the revelation to our own souls of the beauty of holiness, only the revelation of God, in the fullest sense of these words, can teach us to fix our hearts unalterably on God and all that lives with Him and in Him. Only by seeing and knowing Him can we learn to love Him; and only by loving Him are we perfected as men.

It is doubtful if even the information given by such a messenger—apart altogether from the effects such information might produce—would be of much value, or would be permanently accepted as valid. It is true, many in our own day are persuaded that they receive the most assured knowledge of the unseen world by holding direct communication with those who have entered it, and I would be slow to deny the possibility or actuality of all such communication; but as yet this method of discovering the unseen has merely shown how constant a craving for such knowledge exists in men, rather than that much assured and wholesome truth has been reached by it. He was more deeply instructed who rather shrank from any such reappearances of the dead, and anticipated the fruitlessness of any such comfort :

“ If any vision should reveal  
Thy likeness, I might count in vain,  
As but the canker of the brain ;  
Yea, though it spake and made appeal

To chances where our lots were cast  
Together in the days behind,  
I might but say, I hear a wind  
Or memory murmuring the past."

It is not in that direction we need look for relief from our skepticism with all its unrest, vacillation, and brooding sadness. But does not God *everywhere* elude observation? Is God not unwilling that we should know Him? Does He not hide Himself? Are not clouds and darkness impenetrable round about Him? Not so. God seeks to make Himself known to you. He wishes to bring as much light as possible into your mind, and has used the best means of introducing that light. Why then do so many earnest men spend their years in a vain search for God? Why have so many most thoughtful and inquiring men missed the light they have all their days been looking for, and without which they have no joy in life? Partly, perhaps chiefly, because, like the rich man, each inquirer prefers some self-devised method of revelation to the method God has actually adopted. To those who understand that God is the One Living Spirit, all things reveal Him, He besets them behind and before, and though they should be oppressed by the presence and flee from it, God awaits them in their place of flight and they cannot escape Him. The intelligence discernible in all things, in their harmony and unity, in their universal subservience

of one plan and contribution to progress--this is God. The holy love that is discernible in the law that governs human affairs--this is God. More discernible is this law in Jewish history than elsewhere, because the Jews awaited its working, and observed and recorded it, while other races mistook what they had to deal with. But if men look for a God that is not or where He is not, they cannot find Him. If they will not look at things as they actually are; if they will not consider what Moses and the Prophets teach; if they will not recognize the unseen Spirit that trained and guided and made Himself felt by Israel; if they shut their eyes to the embodiment of that Spirit in Christ, and to His working since in millions of our race; if, that is to say, they exclude all that is most significant in human history, can we expect anything else than that the search for God elsewhere will be fruitless and disappointing? If we find God at all, we must find Him not spectrally separate from all known realities, but in and through all things that are, and especially in and through human history and our own souls.

Through all these things God reveals Himself to us, as to moral and reasonable creatures, who can be more profoundly influenced by appeals to conscience and reason than by startling and abnormal apparitions. And if from these things we can learn nothing about God and our duty to

Him, still less are we likely to learn from necromancy. Conscience lies deeper in us and is a more essential organ than the eye, and if conscience responds to all that Moses and the Prophets, completed and interpreted by Christ, tell us about God, this is an infinitely worthier testimony to His existence and His truth than if an unsubstantial shade hovered before the eye, and in some hollow, sepulchral mutterings, warned us of the results of unbelief. If your faith is weak, do not wait for unusual manifestations or novel proofs of things unseen, but use the means of knowing God which others have found sufficient, and which God has actually furnished. Keep your mind saturated with the teachings and life of Christ, and what your conscience responds to, see that you act upon. For if the humble and loving tone of the morality you find there enters into your blood, the eyes of your understanding will become brighter to discern spiritual things. Begin at the right end, and with what is already within your reach. Begin with what you know to be true, that is, with what your conscience accepts. Begin with obedience, with gratefully accepting a light upon duty and upon your relation to the persons and things around you which you cannot but own to be the truest and best, and by following this light you will at length reach an atmosphere in which things will assume their right and true proportions. Thus will you earn



the reward of humility and truthfulness of spirit, not outrunning your actual faith, but not lagging behind conscience; thus will you learn the truth of the Lord's own words: "If any man do the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God." The pure in heart shall see God; if not now, then hereafter.

## THE UNJUST JUDGE.

LUKE xviii. 1-8, and LUKE xi. 5-13.

THE two Parables of the Importunate Friend at midnight and the Importunate Widow illustrate the same idea, that importunity prevails irrespective of the character or disposition of the person on whom it is practised. Alike in this, the Parables differ inasmuch as the one has a general, the other a special reference. The successful importunity of the midnight petitioner is a sample of the success that attends all persevering prayer. The widow's conquest of the surly judge is intended to encourage the disciples of Christ to the persistent expectation of His second coming, and to unwearied prayer for that good time when all their desires shall be fulfilled. All prayer is trying to the character, and few persons there are who can perseveringly offer the "effectual fervent" prayer which avails : but there is special temptation to faint in prayer for the coming of the Son of man. Wrongs are so slowly righted ; wisdom, justice, and righteousness make such little way upon earth ; misery and wickedness renew themselves with a vigor so unabated, that the most sanguine are often tempted to refer

this to indifference on the part of Him who reigns and has all power. It is not easy to reconcile the meagre, unsatisfactory results of Christianity in the world with the claims and promises of Christ, and under the pressure of this difficulty many cease to hope and pray and sink into a bewildered or quite unbelieving habit.

These Parables, then, are meant to afford us effectual encouragement in prayer. Those who first faint in prayer and then cease to pray commonly do so from some kind of latent feeling that God does not regard them. Well, says our Lord, even supposing He does not regard you, do not give up asking, for even in the most unpromising circumstances persevering and importunate entreaty gets what it seeks. Take the most sluggish and selfish nature, the man who won't so much as get out of bed to do a friend a good turn,—you can make him do what you want by the very simple device of going on knocking till you cause it to dawn upon his slumbering brain that the only way to get the sleep he so much desires is first of all to satisfy you. Or take the other most unpromising case you can think of, that of a thoroughly and unscrupulously unjust judge. The man who, of all living Englishmen, knows the East best, says that “there are three ways of treating Asiatic officials—by bribe, by bullying, or by bothering them with a dogged perseverance into attending to you and your concerns.” The

two former methods being out of the question with a poor widow, she adopts the third. She does not go home and wail to her children, she does not content herself with regretfully wishing that a just judge occupied the judgment seat; she merely makes up her mind: "I *will* have justice. I will annoy, pester, harass, torment, plague him, until he sees that the easier course for himself is to look into my matters. I am but a poor, desolate, weak creature; but as the small insect can madden the hugest beast of the forest, so will I fix upon him until he shall be glad to get quit of me at any price."

The principle which these Parables illustrate is well understood—the principle that importunity succeeds in wringing consent from the reluctant, relief from the niggardly, its own way from all. The dog that is driven from following his master understands that, if he only continue, his master will yield and give him his way. Never a child grew up ignorant of this, that prolonged, persistent crying can wring from a parent what has been absolutely refused at first. It is to this principle the beggar trusts when he obstinately shuts his ears to denial, and follows supplicating till an alms is given, not to relieve him, but to relieve the giver. And it was on this principle the widow of the Parable acted, not counting at all on the charity of the judge, but still confident that she would get from him what he had no desire nor intention

to give her; knowing that, if she only held to him, the time would come when he should be forced to say, "Because this widow troubleth me, I *will* avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me." There was nothing in the judge the widow could count upon. There was no influence, human or Divine, which this poor woman could bring to bear upon him. Would she threaten him with Divine vengeance and call heaven to witness against his injustice? He would like it, he would count it a treat; he would call in his companions to help him to enjoy the widow's anguish. Would she come meekly, piteously, and fall at his feet, pointing to her sackcloth and her train of helpless children? Would she hold up to him the little infant to smile in his face and melt the hard heart? He would drive her from his judgment seat with a curse, or he would jest with her, or turn to other business. Would she inform against him or expose him? He was already exposed, and had nothing to hide. Would she get help against him? But he was the man of whom all others were afraid. Here, in short, was a man of whom the description is intended to convey to us the idea that he was thoroughly impracticable,—that if in any circumstances a person might seem warranted in turning away hopeless, this widow was in such circumstances, and yet she obtained her request.

The argument our Lord builds on these

instances is very intelligible and very cogent. Reckon on finding in God no more readiness to hear and to help than you can count on in the most hardened and illiberal and selfish of men, and yet do not rest till you obtain your request from Him. Though you have not yet succeeded, and though you are beginning to think prayer utterly useless and a mere waste of time and of feeling, follow Him, cry after Him, lay hold on His skirt, and weary Him into compliance. Though, so far from indicating the slightest willingness to help and bless you, God had again and again repulsed you; though He had given you every reason to believe that He would never grant your request nor raise a finger to help you, yet the course which reason and your own interest approve is to persist in presenting your suit before Him. To do otherwise would be to prove yourselves bereft of the wit of this poor untrained widow, and even of the instinct of the inferior creatures. Though you had reason to believe that God has no love, no interest in you, that you are as unlikely to move Him as this widow who had none to speak a word for her to the judge, though all the world is saying, "There is no help for him in God," and though your own soul is saying, "I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind," yet you may have your desire. Only when you can say, There is nothing God can give me;

only when you can say that already you have in actual and secure possession what you are ready to spend eternity with; only then can you reasonably cease to pray.

This, however, by no means exhausts the force of our Lord's argument in the Parable. There is a "how much more" in it. The argument is not merely, If the unjust judge was thus coerced, you may also expect God to yield; but rather, If persistent entreaty prevailed with one who was resolved not to give, how much more will it prevail with one who is more anxious than the petitioner himself that justice be done. Suppose that the wisdom and integrity of the judge had never been questioned; that his name had become the synonym for righteous and equitable judgment; that every man who had a just cause rejoiced when appeal could be made to him; and that he was especially regarded by the poor and oppressed as their champion and defender; nothing but unpardonable weakness could have made the widow despair of being heard by such a man. Suppose that her case required delay, and that the judge had assured her of this in the tenderest and most encouraging terms that could be used from his seat of office—would she not have been almost worthy of misery had she gone from court grumbling or fearful? Suppose still further that during the whole term of her

suit the judge was doing her many acts of kindness, providing for her children, reminding her of his friendship for her deceased husband, assuring her on his oath of the ultimate success of her appeal, sending her every morning some little token to keep her heart up—can you conceive any one so unreasonable as to cherish suspicion in such circumstances? But even such a state of matters does not represent our own relation to God in prayer. For it is absolute justice, absolute faithfulness, absolute simplicity of purpose to bless us, with which we have to do.

In our day fainting in prayer arises not from any direct doubt of God's goodness so much as from the belief that, however much He was concerned in setting this world in motion at the first, He has retired from any active interference in its affairs, and allows it to be regulated solely by laws inherent in things themselves, or at any rate actually in existence and inexorable. We all find that this world, with ourselves and all else that is in it, is under certain laws—laws of nature, as we call them. We find that a certain never-failing order of things is established. The sun rises every morning without fail, without fail it shines on us more in summer than in winter; the tides ebb and flow in unaltering and calculable order; certain diseases have a course that can be predicted. Wherever



we recognize this inflexible course of things, we accept it as the order established by God's will and submit ourselves to it. A man may know that the rising of to-morrow's sun will bring with it death or misery worse than death, but he does not pray that the sun may not rise. He knows that, pray as he may, the sun will rise. The godly maiden, who for her faith was bound to a stake within reach of the tide, did not pray that the tide might be stayed in its flow; or, whether she prayed or not, the tide, gradually and precisely in its usual manner, came in, making no recognition of her prayers or of her condition. The most believing of men ceases to pray for the life of a friend who is declared and seen to be drawing near to death. In such cases it becomes apparent to the petitioner that his desires are not consistent with the will of God, and he feels that to continue to pray would be not reverent but irreverent.

But it is argued, and with much plausibility, that every future event, every occurrence of any kind that may in any way affect us, is already as certain as the death of a man incurably diseased. The storm which wrecks the ill-fated ship is not aroused by chance, but by definite though sometimes obscure and complicated causes. And if the wife or mother who prays for those at sea saw these causes, would not prayer die from her lips, and the chill of despair

freeze the warm utterances of faith? The prayer is uttered because the event is not seen to be certain; the effect is not seen in the cause; but an enlarged knowledge of the laws of nature, a deeper insight into the connection of one thing with another, would see that only one event is possible, and that it is useless hoping for any other. Every man ceases to pray when he sees what is going to happen. But everything is as certainly produced by causes already in existence, as that effect which he distinctly foresees. We pray because we are ignorant of what is going to take place; but if our knowledge of all the laws of nature were as accurate as our knowledge of some of them is, we should altogether cease to pray.

Many persons, moved by such representations, do abandon the practise of prayer. We may suppose one of their number stating his case in this way: I believe in God. I believe that every law which regulates the course of things in this world is of His appointment, and is therefore the best possible. I am perfectly satisfied with what I receive from the operation of these laws; any suffering I have to endure I recognize as perfectly just. I am aware that the government under which I should have been perfectly happy could not have been a just government. I am content to live on under these laws, and I resign myself to them. But when you ask me to pray, you

perplex me. I can worship God : I can come to Him morning and evening and acknowledge Him and delight in Him. But when you ask me to be continually laying before Him some request for His interference with the natural result of those very laws He has appointed as the best ; when you bid me ask Him for anything which would not come to me by the operation of natural laws, you perplex me wholly. Prayer, instead of being the strength and joy of my religion, has been my permanent difficulty, an insoluble puzzle. I seem to have more faith in God when I do not pray. I find it easier to believe in God when I think of Him as the Author of nature who knows that " we have need of all these things," than when I am asked to supplicate His interference with the established order of things.

And yet the reasoning which results in prayerlessness is not so conclusive as it seems. This reverence for the order of nature, on which it proceeds, does not prevent its devotees from resisting its laws to the utmost and from endeavoring to manipulate them to their own advantage. They check the natural course of a disease, and thwart the operation of the laws which govern disease, by the skill that comes of accumulated observation and experiment. They do not allow nature to take its course, but guide it so as to avert threatening danger. May not God do the same? May not the subtle, incomprehensible

Intelligence that resides in nature and upholds it, guide it in ways and to issues unattainable by our puny efforts?

There are two powers which we ourselves possess and which we cannot but ascribe to God also. We have, first, a power in our own wills to move our own bodies. This power is mysterious and not as yet understood. We cannot understand how a spiritual force such as that of the will can become a physical force, lifting the arm, moving the lips, and so forth. But, understood or not understood, the power exists. God, though unseen and spiritual, has the same power directly to move material things and effect His will in them. To this power the limit can only be in God Himself, not in any external obstacle.

We have also a power to play off one law of nature against another; to make a balloon rise, *e.g.* by using the law of the levity of gas to counteract the law of gravitation. We can make one ingredient in nature counterwork another, and so use its right hand against its left as to make it harmless where otherwise it would be hurtful. The law that guides a disease to a fatal issue we can defeat by the help of another law which gives to certain remedies power to check and remove the disease. By adjusting one law of nature to another, by bringing together things naturally separate, and by directing the course of natural law into channels of our own devising, we

can bring about results of the most surprising kind, and which could never be brought about by nature herself. The telescope, the hydraulic press, the railway, the telegraph—these are not natural results, but they are results of natural laws manipulated by human ingenuity. This power to use nature for purposes she could never of herself accomplish, we cannot but ascribe to God as well as to ourselves. We cannot but believe that if there be a God, a conscious, intelligent, individual existence at the root of all that is, He must have this power of playing off one law of nature against another, and of so guiding, controlling, and adapting the whole of nature and every part of it as to work out His own purposes. He has this power, not in the measure we have it so that we can produce results which seem miraculous to the uninitiated, but absolutely and without measure so that He can produce results inconceivable and incomprehensible.

But even though God's power to answer prayer be not questioned, it may still be doubted whether He can be expected to depart from His purpose or "plan" of all that is to be. It is sometimes said to be impious, irreverent, blasphemous, to ask God to allow our wills to influence His, our wisdom to instruct His, our interests to counterbalance the interests of the universe. But it is obvious that God's plan may have included this very thing, that certain results are to be brought

about by prayer. God's eternal will and knowledge embrace not only certain ends that are to be accomplished, but all that is to bring about these ends. His design is not an outline or skeleton draft of the future, but an outline filled in with every detail. It is very conceivable that God may have ordained that such and such things take place in connection with and as the result of the prayers of those who wait upon Him; and if so, prayer cannot be considered an interference with His plan, but a fulfilment of it.

But that which too frequently gives force to all objections is our own experience of the slender results of prayer. We faint in prayer, and gradually become formal and remiss, because our own prayers have so often been apparently in vain. We believe in hard work, because what we work for we get. We can see in our life the results of hard work; but some of us are ready to say we can see in our possession not one thing which we might not equally have had, had we never prayed. This is the temptation not only of the individual, but of the Church. All Christian people have been praying for eighteen centuries that the kingdom of God might come, and how small an appearance of answer has there been.

But convincing as the evidence of experience is, we may misconstrue experience, and must balance it by considerations which also have weight. We must consider that there may be

good reason for not answering some prayers, and also that our Lord foresaw that it would be difficult to maintain faith and therefore encourages us to do so.

That there may be reason for not answering some prayers we cannot but admit. We are aware that we have uttered unseasonable, ill-considered, petulant, unholy prayers. It cannot but make us ashamed to reflect how frequently we have besought God to pander to the most unworthy feelings, to make provision for the flesh, to satisfy our own petty ambition, to gratify some earthly passion. Prayers which at bottom are dictated by mere self-love, sensuality, ambition, envy, revenge, covetousness, are not heard. And if in our conscience we know that the disappointment of our desires was calculated to do us more good than their gratification; if, that is, we recognize that the consideration which refused our petitions was really deeper than that which should have granted them; then we see how right and reasonable has been the delay in answering us. And such delays are teaching us more and more that it is when we "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" that we are answered speedily; it is when we get up above what is merely selfish, individual, and earthly, and rise to the region in which we begin to see what it is God is aiming at and counts worthy of His effort, it is when our hearts are

enlarged by a knowledge of His purposes, and we begin to seek the common good and blessings that are eternal, that we feel confidence in prayer and know it must prevail.

Answers are delayed, too, because the prayer was not hearty. God has made no promise to answer insincere prayer; and that prayer is insincere which is not followed up by hearty efforts to obtain the thing sought. Or it is so formal that, though the answer came, we should not recognize it. Angels are at our gates, but because their wings are folded and we have not traced their descent from heaven, we do not notice them nor invite them to abide with us. We lose thus a thousand of God's gifts, not recognizing that the very thing we need is brought within our reach. We see the change of circumstances, not the fresh opportunity; we feel the disappointment, not the hand of God giving us humility; we recognize the bitterness and the sorrow, but not the heavenly mind and abandonment of worldly ambitions which they enfold.

Again, there is an order in God's gifts, and we cannot have the greater unless first we have the less. We ask God to give us this or that grace, as if it could be suddenly conferred upon us, irrespective of our present character; and we ask it without considering how much we ourselves may have to do and to suffer before we can attain it. Character has an organic integrity and a con-



secutive growth as a tree has. You cannot expect fruit if there has been no blossom. No power can cause fruit to grow before a branch has grown to bear it. But in many of our petitions we ask God to give us fruit without either branch, blossom, or time. We ask Him to build the top story of our house before the lower story is begun. We wish ability to accomplish certain objects before we have the fundamental graces out of which that ability can alone spring. Your child asks you to give him your skill in calculating or your knowledge of a language; what can you do? You can only say to him, "My boy, these things cannot be immediately given. I can only see that you are educated and help you to persevere, and one day you will have the knowledge you ask. But it cannot be given; it must grow. You cannot get it without me, but neither can you get it without much hard work of your own."

So when we are suddenly put to shame by our lack of Christian temper, or courage, or charity, or sobriety of mind, or unworldliness, we as suddenly ask Christ for the grace we need, apparently supposing that it is as easily manufactured and assumed as a new suit of clothes; that we have just to give the order and put on the ready-made habit. Let us deal reasonably with God. Let us bear in mind that many of the gifts we are in the habit of asking are such qualities of soul as

can be produced only by long and painful processes. You ask for humility. Do you consider that in so doing you ask for that which makes humility humiliation; for failure, mortified vanity disappointed hopes? You ask for a heavenly mind. Do you consider that in so doing you ask to be led forward to those painful times which compel men to feel that here they have no permanent home? You ask to be near Christ and like Him. Can you be baptized with His baptism, can you drink of His cup?

But undoubtedly that on which we chiefly and wisely fall back is the plain command of our Lord, that we should continue praying. Very often we have just to own we do not see all round this matter, and abide by the unmistakable promise which built up our Lord's own strength, "Ask, and ye shall receive." If there was one thing more than another He taught about God, it was just this, that He answers prayer; if there is any truth, any meaning in His plain assertion that He knew God, and that by having been in heaven He understood how heavenly things are managed, then there can be no doubt that if we go on asking we shall receive, and that if we go on knocking at that door which now is shut we shall one day find entrance to the light we crave, and pass through all that bars our progress. This is the time of seeking, this is the time when we may reasonably say, "We are but of yesterday,

and know nothing ; ' it becomes us, therefore, to believe, to inquire, to be diligent in seeking what our highest instincts prompt us to, assured that one day the door shall be open to those who have besieged it, and that we shall have what we now crave and enter on the fruit of all honest effort.

## THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN AT PRAYER.

LUKE xviii. 9-14.

THE purpose of this trenchant Parable is explicitly stated. It was leveled at those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." Such a temper is offensive in whatever field of conduct it is displayed. It must not be confounded with humble self-reliance. It is quite possible to have a correct estimate both of one's own merits and of other people's. A military commander frequently conjoins with entire self-confidence a salutary respect for the skill and strength of the force that opposes him. But a self-confidence which exhibits itself at the expense of other men, and counts its merits exceptional, is offensive, and if not empty and delusive is at least foolish. Self-admiration effectually excludes a man from the admiration of others; and although self-confidence will often carry a man over many of the ordinary difficulties of life, it almost certainly betrays him into greater difficulties.

That religion, whose function it is to render men humble and loving, should actually in many

instances make them self-satisfied and contemptuous, calls for explanation. And the explanation is not far to seek. Human nature displays itself in religion as in everything else with which men have to do. The men who in the ordinary walks of life seek a cheap success carry their slothful ambition into religion, and crave an eminence that costs them little. The shallow characters that are content to have the appearance without the reality, reputation without worth, applause without desert, priority and high station without superior excellence, are content to be accepted as godly, although void of the love of God. And this lack of integrity and downright thoroughness, this craving for appearance and reputation irrespective of reality and excellence, is so common in every community that morality and religion tend to be dissociated. There are always persons who wish to be recognized as eminently religious; their desire for recognition exceeds their craving for that which deserves it, and unconsciously they erect a standard of judgment which is at once easy of attainment and out of the ordinary reach.

Pharisaism was the ripest historical manifestation of this constant tendency, and has therefore given its name to similar manifestations in all ages. With a single touch our Lord brings out in the Parable the two characteristics of all Pharisaism—its ambitious motive and its false standard. The Pharisee of the Parable thanks God he is not

as other men ; his religion has been rather an affair between him and other men than between him and God. His object in cultivating religion has been to surpass other men and win their favorable judgment ; and now that he has made good for himself the claim to be a religious man he is satisfied. Further, the standard of comparison which he uses, and by applying which he fancies himself superior to others, is one not of morality but of superficial purity and formal observances ; he is not an adulterer, nor an extortioner, and he fasts twice a week.

It is this tendency to judge by outward acts rather than by the essential character, and to substitute observances for righteousness, which constitutes the danger of Pharisaism. Anxious rather to have the credit of being righteous than actually to be so, the Pharisee thinks it enough to maintain an outward purity of life. The letter of the law he knows he must satisfy, and in all matters to which that letter applies he is careful and exact. But while attending to his conduct so far as it meets the eye, he is careless of the state of his heart. The man, the real nature and permanent dispositions, are overlooked, and nothing is thought of but the conduct. The idea grows that good actions make a good man, and it is forgotten that unless the man is good the actions cannot be good. The Pharisee holds that good fruit makes the tree good, and does not believe that only if

the tree is good can the fruit be good. His own eternal character he is little concerned about, if only he has a good reputation: the real good of men is not the object of his moral endeavors, and so he is satisfied if he seems to be fulfilling the law. There is thus propagated a misconception of morality all round; a misconception of its nature, of its use, of the means of its attainment.

Morality being thus misconceived, religion also is misconceived. The Pharisee, aiming only at a superficial and selfish morality, feels no need of coming into a living fellowship with the root of all goodness in God. It is impossible, therefore, he should understand what religion is. But seeking to have a conspicuous religion, he finds this in a routine of observances which can be performed irrespective of character, by good men and bad men alike. Certain observances are added to the moral law, and by degrees these observances take a higher place than the common duties of life. These extras come to be considered the distinctive mark of a religious man, so that each person's status or rank in the religious world is determined by his observance of these, and not by his regard to justice, charity, truth, purity. And when Pharisaism dominates in any community, men are actually judged irrespective of character, and their position as religious or irreligious persons is determined by their observance or non-observance of certain outward forms and practises which have no

necessary connection with morality. If inquiry is made regarding a man's religion, if it is asked whether he is a religious or an irreligious man, such features of his life are cited as, that he has prayers in his family night and morning, that he is regular in his attendance at church, that he takes an interest in ecclesiastical affairs, but not that he is honorable and straightforward in business, helpful to his relatives, careless of display and of gain. It is obvious that a man of no character can fast twice a week, and will do so if he can thereby secure his own ends. Of all such observances we may use Paul's language and say, "Meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse."

The Pharisee thus misapprehends the meaning and use of religious observances, and distorts the relation between morality and religion. The great end of religion is to bring us into perfect harmony with God, a harmony which is not the merely apparent and temporary alliance which can be effected by compulsion or outward arrangement, but the thorough unanimity and eternal fellowship which result from identity of will and similarity of character. In a word, the great end of religion is to make us like to God—to make us just and loving, truthful and pure. Religion has not done its work until we are in very truth the children of God; and we cannot be called re-



religious men, in any but a most superficial and misleading sense, until we are morally like God. In order to accomplish this great end of religion a certain training is needful, and this training is aided by the observance of certain practises, rites, and forms of worship. Prayer, worship, attendance on ordinances, and so forth, are requisite as means for the attainment of the knowledge and love of God out of which holiness springs. Unfortunately, the practise of these observances is much more obvious as a distinctive mark of religious people than the result of them in exceptional holiness of life. Not all who profess religion become more upright and less worldly than their neighbors, but all who profess religion do attend church and maintain certain appearances of godliness. And in consequence, these observances become identified with religion, while a high and pure morality does not become so identified; and in determining whether a man is or is not religious, attention is turned to a few habits, whose real importance lies solely in what they accomplish and not at all in themselves. And thus Pharisaism is encouraged; and men who would not for the world go to bed without saying their prayers, or who make a great scruple about it, make no scruple at all about slandering or cheating their neighbor, about being cold and sullen and tyrannical at home, greedy in business, vindictive and violent in their dealings with men.

Evidently no perversion of religion could be more fatal than this substitution of the means for the end. To make religion consist in repeating prayers, observing fasts, attending ordinances, upholding rites, is to reduce it to a pernicious, delusive, deadening, worse than useless burden, which reasonable men must and ought at once to abolish. To encourage men to imagine that they have attained the summit of human excellence when they can fast twice a week is plainly to burlesque religion. To induce men to measure their religious attainment by their diligence in any kind of ritual observances is simply to fatally delude them. Religion, instead of being the very life of the spirit, giving it its true place in the universe and imparting to it eternal principles, is transformed into a mere matter of external performances, which might be as accurately discharged by a soulless automaton.

The character developed by such a conception of religion is obnoxious alike to God and man, offending God by a superficial homage and alienating men by self-satisfied pride. The God of the Pharisee is not the loving Father of all men, but a distant, self-seeking Sovereign who must be propitiated by rites and ceremonies and sacrifices, and who cares little for the love of men and has little interest in their genuine spiritual growth. The Pharisee's religion is a mere tax paid to this unattractive and impossible Being, and not an

essential of human life. And the more diligent in his religion the Pharisee is, the less capable does he become of cherishing any rational and large views of God's relation to the world and of His work in it.

Such a religion stunts his humanity as well, and instead of softening him and widening his sympathies and expanding his heart and his life, by the consciousness that God is his and will control the future, it contracts and hardens his whole nature. He is recognizable by his "despising others." A just estimate of the difference in natural advantages which makes that easy to one which is impossible to others; an intelligent comparison of the various difficulties with which different men have to contend; a perception of what perfectness of character really is, tends to make good men slow to pronounce upon their neighbors. They know something of their own frailty, and how much depravity lies hid under a fairly righteous conduct; they know how obstinately the heart clings to natural vices of thought and feeling, and how insecure the attainment already made seems to be, and how remote from a state in which sin is impossible, and feeling how slight and hardly won their own victories are, they have sympathy with the defeated and are slow to condemn them. Besides, the chief element in true growth is growth in love: no man is making permanent growth in character who is not growing

in sympathy, in pity, in helpfulness, in all that connects him with his fellow-men. To be perfect is to be able to add much to the good of the world, that is to say, to have the disposition and the ability to help weaker men against vice and its consequences. The attainment in godliness which is content with looking down on sinful men and keeping its own garments clean is no attainment at all. And any true discernment of the actual terms on which the battle of right and wrong has actually to be fought out by men in this world makes it impossible to despise those who fall. Pharisaic contempt can only result from a total misapprehension of what human virtue consists in and of how it is attained.

Foolish, hateful, and fatal as these views of religion are then, we must beware lest we ourselves be infected with the leaven of the Pharisees. We are so, when we allow our attention to the forms of religion to hide from us our neglect of its inward spirit ; when we can detect the slightest disposition to judge our religious life by its manifestations in worship rather than by its manifestations in conduct ; when we allow ourselves in a self-satisfied comparison with those who do not carry so many of the external marks of religion as we do, but who surpass us in generosity, in honor, in kindness, even in a self-abasing consciousness of sin. We are infected with the leaven of the Pharisees when we in any way mistake

means for ends ; when we read the Bible or pray as if these occupations were duties to be done for their own sakes and not for the sake of the result they have ; when we are satisfied with having attended church, though it has done us no good ; when we allow religious service to be an end in itself and not a means towards something beyond itself. We are infected with the leaven of the Pharisees when we look more to the duties we do than to the spirit and motive from which they spring ; when we become satisfied with ourselves because we do certain things which other men do not, and when in place of lowliness and charity our religion is producing in us self-complacency and either a hard contempt or a compassionate patronage of other men.

This, then, is the type of religion our Lord exhibits in the Pharisee of the Parable. He sets before the mind's eye of His hearers a person they were very familiar with and secretly abhorred, though they feared to express their abhorrence. They daily saw the man enter the temple with scrupulous conformity to every prescription of the law of Moses and of the traditions of the elders—having undergone all the required ablutions, with phylacteries fastened in the most approved fashion, his face shining with sanctimonious self-satisfaction, or, on fast days, carefully left unwashed and untrimmed, that it might be seen he had been fasting, pompously and decorously

approaching the place of prayer, and with measured phrase, disturbed by no agitating emotion, uttering his unwitting self-condemnation. The prayer our Lord puts into his lips looks at first sight like a caricature, and we find it difficult to believe that any man, however dyed with Pharisaism, could be so absolutely self-complacent in his superiority as this prayer indicates. But not only are there actual prayers on record which rival this in blind self-adulation, but it is certainly not an overdrawn picture of the Pharisaic mind.

In contrast to the superficial religion of forms, our Lord sets true heart-religion. Over against the Pharisee, satisfied with himself and despising others, stands the publican, so occupied with his own sinful state that he cannot think of other men. There is no comparison instituted between the Pharisee and the impenitent sinner, though even such a comparison might not be altogether to the advantage of the clean-living Pharisee; for self-satisfaction is a more obstinate bar to progress than the vices of men who make no pretensions to virtue. But between the Pharisee and the penitent publican the comparison must be wholly in favor of the latter. Here is a man who unconsciously goes direct to the heart of religion. By a simple recognition of his actual condition he shoots at a bound far ahead of the Pharisee. The very circumstance that his sins are gross and undeniable is in his favor. Condemned as he is

by the judgment of men, he feels himself to be inexcusable ; and aided thus by the conscience of others, his own conscience loudly accuses him.

The true penitent is identified by every mark of humble and sincere contrition : he stands afar off, his shame will not suffer him to lift up his eyes ; in his misery he beats his breast ; he cannot, so deep in his sense of guilt, even address God directly, but merely ejaculates, "God be merciful to me a sinner." It is the picture of a man thoroughly alive to all the shame and misery of sin. His sin is past apology, extenuation, or explanation. It is the grand feature of his life : he has nothing else to speak of ; it occupies his thoughts. He has not the remotest idea that anything acceptable to God can be found in him. "A sinner"—that is the term that describes him. Mercy is the only attribute of God he dare appeal to. He does not buoy himself up with any remembrance of almsdeeds or prayers in the past, nor with any promise of amendment. His is a case that it is in vain to disguise ; he does not attempt to give any account of it : he can but utter the one cry that is left to the man who knows his whole life has been wrong and that no power of reparation is now left to him.

Such a condition is probably not rare. Rare it may be in instructed and religious circles, where penitence is urged as a duty ; but probably not rare among those who have not put themselves

much in the way of religious instruction and whose penitence is the sincere and genuine growth of their own experience of the fruits of sin. Life is the most effective teacher; and where elaborate doctrinal instruction often produces only Pharisees, life produces true penitents. And plainly our Lord means to shed a ray of hope into those dark regions which lie outside the pale of ecclesiastical teaching; for though both men were praying in the temple, the impression is left on the mind that the publican was a somewhat unfamiliar visitant of the place of prayer. The ignorant cry of the sinner, almost crushed with despair, has in it, our Lord would say, the germ of a new life. The moment of heart-broken hopelessness is like the sinking in death of the old life, which makes way for a new hope in God and a new life in Him. To be absolutely broken in our own self-confidence and stopped in our own way is the turning point which brings us to God's everlasting way. It is an experience full of wretchedness, but only by a clear recognition of our actual state can amendment be begun. If we are to find our life in God, life in self must be proved futile. If we are to use intelligently the helps God affords us, we must see our dangers. If salvation from sin is to be rational and real, it must meet us where we are and be applied to us as we are. We must face the actual truth about the relation which our life holds to perfect holiness. We must fairly



judge ourselves by a perfect life and own to all actual derelictions of duty. We are not summoned to penitence as a seemly and suitable acknowledgment of God ; we are summoned to own and face the truth, to touch and take to do with reality, to look at life as it really is and ourselves as we really are ; and if the truth about our own life and character does not compel shame and humble us before God, we are not asked to force a penitence that is not natural and reasonable.

The circumstance that the humble, broken-hearted publican went down to his house justified rather than the Pharisee, shows us that there is no true religion without a consciousness of sin ; that the consciousness of God involves a consciousness of sin, as the strongest light casts the darkest shadows. God is so subtly interwoven with all things, and especially with all that is moral, that we cannot know Him until we know human life, and cannot know human life until we know Him. The two grandest parts of knowledge go hand in hand and grow together. And you can always tell how much a man knows of God by ascertaining how much he knows of his own sin. By the knowledge of God he is lifted into quite a new point of view. When he knows something of the love, patience, and sacrifice of God, he finds himself in a new moral world, in the presence of principles and purposes infinitely exalted above those he has been familiar with,

and applying to all things a scale immeasurably higher. When the life of Jesus Christ is taken seriously as the one standard or mirror for all human life, when it is seen to be the Divine idea for us all, we cannot but sink in shame at the contrast it presents to our own.

And to which of us is the prayer of the publican unsuitable? Which of us has not sinned without excuse? Who among us can invite God's strict judgment? Would it not be the part of candor and honesty to go to God as frankly and humbly as the publican, and supplicate God's mercy? Must we not be living an altogether delusive life if we are living with sin unconfessed? Is it possible we can be satisfied with our life while we have been at no pains to ascertain how sin is to be dealt with? And is it possible we can leave a sinful past behind us and pass on to the future with principles unchanged, with no certainty that the future will be better than the past, with no real hope or assurance that we are advancing towards a sinless and perfect condition?

To the real penitent this Parable is meant to bring encouragement. It plainly says that God will not despise the prayer of the contrite. When the heart fails under a sense of sin, when the whole of life is filled with darkness, then God is near and accepts the penitent. To be hopeless is at all times mistaken and wrong. To be hopeless is to be godless, and no man is godless however he

may have denied God and forsaken Him. He has a God still, a God ready to forgive, delighting in mercy ; and if nothing else convinces him of God's nearness, his own sense of sin ought to do so, proving, as it does, the supreme importance of all moral relations.

THE END.

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